In the Privacy of One's Own Homelessness:

The Search for Identity in Twentieth-Century Yiddish Travelogues

Yuri Vedenyapin

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2016

ABSTRACT

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This dissertation argues that the richness and distinctiveness of modern Yiddish travel literature—with its emphasis on arriving rather than departing—reflects the complex nature of such notions as home, homelessness, and wandering within East European Jewish culture. It examines the ways in which the experience of travel affected the search for identity, home, and belonging by Yiddish writers from the first secularized and westernized generation of East European Jews. Yiddish travelogues written in the first four decades of the twentieth century show a curious trend with respect to the search for identity and the destinations that are their subject. These destinations fall into two categories: those with specific Jewish connotations and those without. For writers addressing the latter destination category, even though motivated by the search for a Jewish identity, locales beyond the Jewish map engender the greatest sense of empowerment. Even when their ostensible motivations and emphases are diametrically opposed, they arrive at the same conclusion, that Jews belong simultaneously nowhere and everywhere. Peretz Hirschbein and Melech Ravitch are exemplary illustrations of this tendency: the former laments the countless roads on which Jews have traveled and many borders that separate them; he longs for universal brotherhood and closeness to nature, and as such rejects the diversity of the Jewish experience; the latter, on the contrary, celebrates diversity. How can we explain this trend? It is born of the contradictory set of ideological and artistic aims and interests of a generation that rejected the traditional beliefs and lifestyle of their parents, and that aimed to create a body of modern literature in Yiddish that would equal major European literatures, and

that internalized a number of European cultural (primarily literary) tropes. Moreover, this literature was the product of a generation of writers who yearned for an organic connection to Jewish past, present, and future and at the same time saw problems with every existing ideology. The **Introduction** situates the study within the context of Jewish cultural and literary history and addresses questions of scope and methodology. **Chapter 1** analyzes Yiddish travel writers' fascination with exotic destinations lacking specifically Jewish connotations and its role in these writers' struggles to define their cultural identity. **Chapter 2** analyzes the work of Peretz Hirschbein and argues that his longing for universal brotherhood and closeness to nature reflected both a reluctance to celebrate the diversity of the Jewish experience and an impulse to embrace its global proportions. **Chapter 3** focuses on the life and work of Melech Ravitch and contrasts his passion for diversity with the opposite approach of Peretz Hirschbein. **Chapter 4** explores Yiddish writers' travel to Mandate Palestine and to Soviet Russia and focuses on the parallels between travelogues about these two politically charged destinations. **Chapter 5** examines the development of Yiddish travel literature after World War II, focusing both on works that describe travel back to Eastern Europe and are dominated by the themes of mourning and preservation, and on later works, filled with the urge to affirm a worldwide Jewish presence. The **Conclusion** recapitulates the dissertation's main points and stresses the uniqueness of the Yiddish travelogue and its importance in Jewish studies and beyond.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to many individuals and organizations for their support throughout my work on this project. Above all, I would like to thank my dissertation advisor, Professor Jeremy Dauber, for his guidance, encouragement, and patience.

Introduction

1. The Prose and Poetry of Jewish Wandering

The Yiddish-speaking Jew, the twentieth century, and the search for home—these three notions are at the heart of this dissertation. Each may spark an infinite number of associations, opinions, and questions. Why, for instance, did a Jewish journalist in the 1920s choose to write "טוועניטיעטה סענטשורי," using the Yiddish transliteration of the English expression rather than the regular Yiddish equivalent?[1] Was it not partly because the idea of "the twentieth century" was already then—before Stalinism, Nazism, World War II, and the Cold War—inseparable from such categories as foreignness, displacement, and transformation? The grouping together of this "century of horrors" with the world of Yiddish and the opposition between *home* and *homelessness* is anything but arbitrary; one can think of these three notions' various connotations as filling three overlapping circles. Indeed, their overlap is so significant that in order to understand any one of the elements, one must first consider them all.

The political and geographical instability that for centuries characterized the Jewish people's existence has had a major impact on the Jewish psyche. It contributed to a complex engagement with geographic movement and to the development of a set of concepts and aspirations that compelled many individuals to leave their homes even when external circumstances did not render it necessary. This dissertation examines these phenomena within Yiddish culture by looking at modern Yiddish travel literature and argues that this genre is uniquely suited for studying the evolution of modern Jewish identity. Because of their inherent focus on space and movement, strangeness and belonging, change and continuity, these mostly

[1] Yankev Mestl, "A rayze-fond far yidishe vort-kinstler," *Kultur (Chicago)* (November 6, 1925): 1.

unstudied texts serve as a test case for theories that concern some of the most central and challenging issues of modern Yiddish—and Jewish—culture. Twentieth-century Yiddish travelogues and related sources reveal a peculiar relationship between time and space, in which geographic destinations correlate with temporal memories, identities and expectations. They also draw attention to the strikingly ambiguous boundaries between departure and arrival, past and present, individual and collective. Finally, they demonstrate a rootedness in traditional Ashkenazi lifestyle, religious rituals and sensibilities, and the Yiddish language itself.

According to the Hebrew expression, which is popular in Yiddish culture as well, *"Meshane mokem – meshane mazl* ("A change of place brings a change of luck").[2] A somewhat lesser-known version, unique to Yiddish, appends a clarification: *"A mol tsum gutn, a mol tsum shlimazl"* ("Sometimes for better, sometimes for worse"). As is often the case with folk wisdom, the repertoire of Yiddish idioms pertaining to travel, wandering, and leaving home is far from consistent in its views on these matters. On the one hand, it celebrates the search for new possibilities and frowns upon lack of initiative: "*Af an oysgetrotenem veg vakst nit keyn groz"* ("A well-trodden path has no grass"). On the other hand, it expresses skepticism about exchanging a familiar environment, however unsatisfying, for the unknowns of the road: "*Beser a noenter groshn, eyder a vayt kerbl,"* ("Better a groschen nearby than a ruble far away"), *"Zitstu gut, to ruk zikh nit"* ("If all is well, don't move"), or *"Tsen mol trakhtn eyn mol forn"* ("Think ten times, travel once"), *"Az men zitst in der heym, tserayst men nit keyn shtivl"* ("He who stays at home doesn't tear his boots"), or the slightly irreverent proverb *"Ashrey yoyshvey beysekho iz der bester handl"* ("'Blessed are they that dwell in thy house' is the best trade")—an ironic twist on a verse from the Book of Psalms that is reminiscent of Tevye's playful

[2] All translations from Yiddish, Russian, and Polish throughout this dissertation are my own.

reinterpretation of Scripture in Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye der milkhiker*.[3] The number and diversity of these folk expressions, coupled with the multitude of words denoting travelers, wanderers, and tramps—*vanderer, vandler, vogler, vandrovnik, vanderfoygl, navenadnik, arumshleper, goles-oprikhter, and goles-praver*, to mention only a fraction—testify to the immense importance of this subject in Yiddish language and culture and in European Jewish history.

As is implicit in the last two terms for "wanderer," Yiddish culture is inseparable from the notion of *goles* (exile; *galut* in modern Israeli Hebrew), which signifies the Jewish people's state of having been scattered throughout the Gentile world after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D. Yet the notion of *goles* includes more than just the physical state of exile; it has cultural, linguistic, aesthetic, and spiritual connotations and is reflected in what this dissertation argues is Yiddish culture's trademark *restlessness*. As the Polish-Jewish socialist activist and writer Nosn Khanin notes about his childhood: *"Zint ikh gedenk zikh, hob ikh gehat a shvakhkeyt nit tsu zitsn af eyn ort. Es hot mikh shtendik getsoygn arumtsuforn, tsu zen di velt un vi mentshn lebn in di vayte lender* ("For as long as I remember myself, I always found it difficult to stay in one place. I constantly felt the urge to travel, to see the world and the way people lived in distant countries").[4] The constancy with which such sentiments of curiosity, longing, and adventurousness manifest themselves in Yiddish culture begs scholarly investigation.

After all, why were so many ordinary Jews in the towns, or *shtetlekh*, of the so-called "Yiddishland" eager to embark on faraway journeys? What inspired penniless yeshiva students

[3] Psalms 84:5. For other related Yiddish proverbs, see Nokhem Stutshkov's *Oytser fun der yidisher shprakh* (1991) and Ignats Bernshteyn's *Yidishe shprikhverter un rednsartn* ([1948]).

[4] Nosn Khanin, *A rayze iber tsentral un dorem amerike* (New York: Arbeter Ring, 1942), 5.

to fantasize about exotic places on the other side of the globe? What made ordinary Jewish housewives, whose access to education and other important resources for pursuing travel were often severaly limited, express curiosity about the latest news from London, Kenya, or Indochina, places that in practical terms had little relevance to her existence? When it comes to Yiddish travelogues, this distinctly Jewish type of restlessness helped shape writers' distinct literary styles and perception of both the familiar and the foreign reality.

The notions of travel, wandering and homelessness are inseparable from the idea of home. For the East European Jew, the ability to clearly state to others and to oneself, "This is *my* home, *my* town, *my* country, *my* language, *my* people, *my* nation," was at times an unattainable luxury. A vast gulf of complex dilemmas, insecurities, prejudices, and historical ironies separated Jews from their Christian neighbors, when it came to such seemingly straightforward statements reflecting key components of identity. Could a Polish Jew feel at home in Poland as a country, or was the idea of home confined to his or her house, family, or town, or even to the town's Jewish quarter? Should "home" be defined in physical terms, or should cultural, linguistic, religious, artistic and other non-physical universes take precedence here? Finally, in what ways did the worldwide presence of Jewish communities and their diversity affect a Jew's perception of home, belonging, and travel?

When Sholem Aleichem's Tevye is ordered to leave his village due to the latest antisemitic edict, he has a powerful legacy to fall back on in his plight. In his characteristic manner—simultaneously humorous and poignant—this ultimate *folksyid* ("folk Jew") describes his situation as a perfectly *ordinary* consequence of being a member of a perfectly *extraordinary* people:

> Ashreykho Yisroeyl—*az voyl iz tsu mir, vos ikh bin geboyrn gevorn a yid, veys ikh dem tam fun goles-yovn un fun arumshlepn zikh tsvishn di felker un fun* vayisu

> vayakhanu—*vu getogt, dort nit genekhtikt, vorem fun zint me hot mit mir gelernt di sedre "Lekh-lekho" […] halt ikh nokh alts in eygn geyn, un ikh veys nit fun keyn mokem-menukhe ikh zol konen zogn: "Ot o do, Tevye, blaybstu zitsn."* [5]
>
> *Ashreykho Yisroeyl*—fortunate am I to have been born a Jew and to know the taste of *goles-Yovn* [the political and cultural domination of Jews by Greeks during the Hellenistic period] and of wandering among the nations and of *vayisu vayakhanu* ["and they journeyed and they encamped"] – spending a day in one place and the night in another. For since I was taught the portion *"Lekh-lekho"* ["Go Thee Forth"] – […] I've never stopped traveling and I don't know of a place of rest where I could say: "This, Tevye, right here, is where you'll settle down."

Each of the biblical references in this excerpt from the novel's concluding paragraph reinforces the idea that to be a Jew is to be a wanderer: the words from Moses's final blessing of the children of Israel delivered before his death after the forty years of wandering in the desert; the two most frequent words in the description of the Jews' route from Egypt to the Holy Land, and the name of the third portion of Genesis, which opens with God commanding the future progenitor of the Jewish people to leave his native Ur and travel to Canaan.[6] Yet how can homelessness be a blessing? Did Sholem Aleichem intend Tevye's words to sound sincere, the tongue-in-cheek use of scriptural references notwithstanding?

The Tevye stories enormous popularity with the Yiddish reader has much to do with its main character's unquestionable rootedness in the traditional values and references of centuries-old Yiddish culture—including its theme of wandering. Even Tevye's most paradoxical remarks are sincere in the sense of representing the East European Jew's spiritual and cultural essence—what Yiddish calls *dos pintele yid* ("the dot of Jewishness"). Tevye's devotion to Jewishness is definite and unconditional, and this is in part why the expulsion from the village cannot crush his spirit. The depiction of this scene in Maurice Schwartz's 1939 cinematic adaptation further

[5] Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye der milkhiker* (Mexico City: Nidkhey Yisrael, 1958): 192.

[6] Deutoronomy 33:29; Numbers 33; Genesis 12:1.

accentuates the symbolism by showing Tevye as he packs his meager collection of religious books. The visible affection and even joy with which he handles the books conveys a clear message about this Jew's spiritual invulnerability. Tevye can bring his Torah and his Siddur anywhere he goes, and it is they—and not the physical space of the village—that represent something akin to home.

Sholem Aleichem's Tevye is not intended to idealize or romanticize the Jew's position as a wanderer; those tasks were to be amply fulfilled by Sholem Aleichem's literary successors, especially on the poetry front beginning in the 1910s. Tevye simply inhabits that position as harmoniously and confidently as is possible, relying on his faith and his (often bitter) humor for personal and spiritual sustenance. Schwartz's Tevye is inseparable from the film's historical context, which hardly presented a rosy picture: The release date was over a year after Kristallnacht and a few months into the Second World War. For all this historical upheaval, however, Schwartz plays Tevye as a quintessential Pale-of-Settlement Jew who is firmly fixed in his traditional mindset even as he finds himself on the cusp of modernity. Just like Sholem-Yankev Abramovitch's hapless traveler Binyomin, Tevye never even leaves his native Ukraine. It will be up to his children and grandchildren to explore radically new destinations—geographic, intellectual, and spiritual ones—leaving Europe, adopting new tongues, losing religious faith, and engaging with other value systems. Viewed from this perspective, modern Yiddish travel writers—most of them born between 1890 and 1910—are among the boldest of such "explorers," and the body of texts they left behind is particularly enlightening.

While Tevye's wholesome identity was usually out of reach for these modern—and often modernist—writers, the legacy of the *pintele yid* mindset, ingested from their parents, grandparents, traditional education in heder and yeshiva, and from the Yiddish language itself,

remained a dominant force in their identity and literary creativity. They still had to tackle many of the same hard questions regarding Jewish exile and suffering, and they still needed a specifically Jewish framework that would support one's sense of self as a Jew and Yiddish writer. Y. L. Peretz—the youngest member of the "Yiddish classic writer" triumvirate after Abramovitch and Sholem Aleichem—personifies the rise of Yiddish modernism and the beginning of an essentially secular reappropriation and reinterpretation of traditional Jewish values and Yiddish cultural tropes, in ways that often incorporated Romantic and Symbolist elements. Peretz's project was to foster a modern European Yiddish culture that would feature the best of both worlds by retaining its Jewish specificity without being limited by it. Tevye' Torah and siddur are reinterpreted and superseded by secular texts. As a character of Glatshteyn's novel *Ven Yash iz geforn* (When Yash Went Forth; 1938) puts it, while describing his experience of being a Jewish immigrant in Colombia: *"iz nisht keyn sider, zol zayn khotsh a yidishe bikhl, a yidishe tsaytung"* ("if the siddur is no longer there, there should at least be a Yiddish book or a Yiddish newspaper").[7]

Yet if Tevye's view of *goles* was no longer satisfactory for young intellectuals, why do we find such a striking similarity between the ending of *Tevye* and the final paragraph of Peretz Hirschbein's description of his 1914 trip across Latin America? One of the most ambitious and prolific Yiddish travel writers, Hirschbein (1880-1948) concludes his early travelogue by describing a brief conversation with a Russian-Jewish immigrant in the Ashkenazic Jewish cemetery of Pará, Brazil. The impoverished immigrant has found himself in Brazil through a series of unfortunate circumstances and is having a hard time adjusting to life in the exotic environment of the tropics. Lonely and dejected, he cannot understand why anyone would

[7] Glatshteyn 1938: 56.

willingly travel there. *"Vos far a gut yor hot aykh aher fartrogn?"* ("How on earth did you wind up here?"), he wants to know, unaware that his interlocutor is a young writer-traveler in search of knowledge and inspiration. In his succinct reply, Hirschbein invokes a theme that is essentially identical to the message of Tevye's "*Lekh-lekho"* speech—*"Vos vundert aykh azoy? Mir zenen dokh epes yidn…"* ("What surprises you here? Aren't we, after all, Jews?")—a statement with which the immigrant cannot help but agree: *"Yo, emes. Mir zenen yidn…"* ("Yes, this is true. We are Jews.")[8] Yet Hirschbein's use of this theme does reveal a shift in the understanding of *goles*: God is now largely out of the picture.

Nearly three decades later, during the early stages of World War II, a volume marking Hirschbein's sixtieth birthday came out in Los Angeles. On its pages, prominent Yiddish writers unite in their praise of Hirschbein's contribution to Yiddish literature, paying particular attention to his pioneering role as a Yiddish travel writer. As with the production of Maurice Schwartz's *Tevye*, the general mood is anything but celebratory, and many of the contributors to the volume feel compelled to reflect on the situation in Europe. Here, once again, one can discern a shift in the treatment of exile: *goles* is still secular, as in Hirschbein's work, but the theme of Jews' physical and cultural survival is now dominant. This notion is at the center of the contribution to the volume by the prolific Yiddish travel writer, Melech Ravitch (1893–1976):

כאָטש דער שטאָם האָט זײַן לאַנד געביטן
זײַנען די וואַרצלען זײַנע געבליבן אויף איין אָרט שטענדיק —
ווײַל די וואַרצלען זײַנען, די וואַרצלען פֿון דעם שטאָם ייִדישע
ליטעראַטור, זײַנען נישט אין ערד אײַנגעגראָבן, נישט אין אַ לאַנד,
נאָר אין אַ מעכטיקער אַבסטראַקציע, וואָס מיר קענען עס אָפֿט
אין אײַנעניש אָנרופֿן: לעבנס־ווילן פֿון ייִדישן פֿאָלק, אייביקער
לעבנס ווילן.[9]

[8] Peretz Hirschbein, *Fun vayte lender: Argentine, Brazil; yuni-november 1914* (New York: [n.p.], 1916), 256.

[9] Shmuel Niger and Mendl Elkin, eds., *Perets Hirshbeyn: tsu zayn zekhtsikstn geboyrn-tog* (New York: Hirshbeyn yoyvl komitet, 1941): 107.

> Even though the tree's stem moved from one country to another, the roots always remained in the same place—since these are the same as the roots of Yiddish literature's stem and are not based in the soil of any particular country, but rather in a powerful abstraction, which we shall for now call "the Jewish people's eternal will to live."

Founding one's identity on an abstraction is problematic, but it is also empowering, as it allows for unlimited mobility. For Ravitch and for Hirschbein, not to mention scores of other Yiddish travel writers, the experience of coming to unfamiliar environments with the explicit purpose of writing down one's impressions, created the opportunity to *abstractly* reflect on the subjects of home and homelessness in one's own life and, more generally, in Jewish history and culture. Accordingly, the act of leaving home would often result in deeper insights into the world left behind than into the Brazilian jungle or the sand dunes of the Sahara.

The Yiddish expression *"A gast af a vayl zet af a mayl"* ("A guest for a while sees for a mile") refers to guests' supposed ability to notice characteristics of a foreign environment of which the locals may be unaware. Yiddish travel literature serves as a powerful reminder of this proverb's equal, if not greater, applicability to visitors' heightened awareness of their own environments from which they are temporarily separated. The prominent Yiddish short-story writer, journalist and traveler Hersh-Dovid Nomberg (1876–1927) describes his impressions of the crowds on the streets of New York by contrasting the American metropolis with its European counterparts:

ניו־יאָרקער גלייכהייט איז נישט קיין פאַליטישע דאָגמע,
אַ פּרינציפּ, נאָר אַ פאַקט, איך וואָלט געזאָגט — אַ פיזישער
פאַקט. פון טויזנט מענטשן, וואָס זענען פארבײַ מיינע אויגן אין
וואַרשע, צי אין פּאַריז, האָב איך געזען, ד. ה. איך האָב אויף
אַ סעקונדע גישט־וויל־נדיק אָפּגעשטעלט מײַן אויפמערקזאַמקייט
אויף זיי — מינדסטנס עטלעכע צענדליק. איינער איז געווען
געקלײדט עפּעס אַזוי, אַז ס׳האָט אַרויסגערופן אויפמערקזאַמקייט;
איינער האָט געהאַט עפּעס אַן אינטערעסאַנטע פיזיאָנאָמיע; אַ
דריטער האָט געהאַט ליידן אין פּנים א. א. ו. אין בערלין איז
די צאָל, וואָס מען זעט, קלענער; אין ניו־יאָרק האָב איך פון
טויזנט פאַרבײַגייער קיין איינציקן נישט געזען.[10]

> The equality in New York is not a political dogma, not a principle, but a fact—I'd say, it's a physical fact. Of the thousand people who passed before my eyes in Warsaw or Paris, I *saw*—that is to say, automatically fixed my attention upon—at least a few dozen. One person would be dressed in a way that attracted my attention, another person would have an interesting face, a third would have a facial expression of suffering, and so on. In Berlin, the number of people one sees is smaller; in New York, of a thousand passersby I didn't *see* a single one.

The passage is enlightening not merely in its treatment of New York, but also as a window onto Nomberg's perception of his native Poland and its close neighbor Germany. While Nomberg's failure to discern a greater degree of individuality among New Yorkers is partly a reflection of this writer's limited experience of American language, culture, and society, his succinct comparison of New York, Paris, Berlin, and Warsaw sheds light on his identification with Europe and accentuates his moral and aesthetic emphasis on the value of individuality, which, in turn, has implications for understanding the rest of his oeuvre. Even without reading his travelogue of Soviet Russia, published the same year, one could surmise that Nomberg's view of the Communist state, in which the precedence of the collective over the individual is elevated to a governing principle, would exhibit at least some degree of skepticism.

The traveler's temporary alienation from the reality at home—this reality's "defamiliarization," is one reason why travelogues tend to reveal more about the authors' own

[10] Hersh-Dovid Nomberg. *Amerike: ayndrukn un bilder fun tsofn- un dorem-Amerike.* Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1928: 37 (emphasis mine).

identities and cultures than about their destinations. First introduced by the Russian Formalists in the 1910s and 1920s, the notion of defamiliarization was originally applied to the task of explaining what makes art different from other ways of conveying information. As Viktor Shklovsky, one of the key figures of this school, put it, "the purpose of art, then, is to lead us to acknowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition."[11] Taking this principle further, the Formalists argued that just as everyday language becomes defamiliarized through the use of various devices in a literary text, so does literature itself evolve due to its inherent need to maintain its defamiliarizing potential. As conventions of a particular literary form or genre become well established and increasingly predictable, writers engage in experimentation that affects not only a specific work but an entire genre. This Formalist approach offers an effective theoretical framework for understanding how Yiddish travelogues were conceived, developed, and received by their authors and readers.

The appeal of writing about one's experiences of foreign places—and, to an extent, of writing in general—is due in part to the concomitant promise of psychological liberation and renewal. Travel defamiliarizes the most mundane details of everyday life, from getting up in the morning and having breakfast to observing a passerby outside one's window. Furthermore, being on the road defamiliarizes language itself, as words begin to acquire new meanings and connotations. Analysis of travelers' descriptions of what they perceive as foreign and alien gives access to their differentiated idea of themselves, their own identity. The concept of *difference* is crucial here: If A is different from B, then B is to the same extent different from A. It may at first seem paradoxical that the act of writing about the architecture of Addis Ababa, the beauty of Spanish women, or the exotic customs of Peruvian tribes would strengthen a Jewish traveler's

[11] Viktor Shklovsky. "Art as Device." *Theory of Prose*. Trans. Benjamin Sher. Champaign, London (Dalkey Archive Press: 1990) 6.

sense of belonging—whether it was belonging to a people, nation, race, faith, or to a mere "abstraction." Yet by translating these strange realities into their native Yiddish idiom, these writers simultaneously embraced their foreignness and resisted their disorienting nature.

Spoken by the majority of the world's Jewish population for centuries and deeply rooted in *derekh-haShas* ("the Way of the Talmud")—to use Max Weinreich's term for the traditional Jewish lifestyle and mindset—Yiddish is the only living Jewish language that has both an uninterrupted history of use and a vast body of travel literature. It was in the Yiddish-speaking world of Eastern Europe that, following the spread of the ideas of the Haskalah—the Jewish enlightenment movement that originated in Germany the late eighteenth century—traditional Judaism and the encroaching forces of modernity had their most dramatic and at the same time culturally productive encounter.

It is also significant that Yiddish is an *exclusively* Jewish language. Its speaker operates within a linguistic universe shaped by the age-old binaries and values of Judaism, not to mention the inevitable presence of misconceptions and prejudices in a society characterized by such a high degree of insularity. The demands that Yiddish places on its speakers mean that a Yiddish travelogue is by definition *Jewish*. Given that form and content cannot be separated, even the writing system of Yiddish, based on the ancient Hebrew alphabet, has thematic, aesthetic, and ideological implications.

The link between language and worldview is especially significant for that generation of Yiddish speakers the majority of whose members were brought up in traditional homes. While describing his impressions of Spain, the famous Yiddish novelist and playwright Sholem Asch—less known as an accomplished travel writer—introduces the voice of his mother: *"Mayn muter volt gezogt: azoy vi der Sambatyen rut nisht, azoy rut nisht Bartselona"* (My mother would have

said, 'Barcelona is like the Sambation: it never rests').[12] Asch's mother's vocabulary and her system of references, rooted in the imagery of *Tsene-rene* (the Yiddish Bible aimed at women) and other elements of a traditional Polish-Jewish woman's lifestyle and mindset, become intertwined with Asch's own rapturous impressions of Barcelona. The very notion of being in Spain recalls his teenage *"beys-medresh-yorn"* (prayer house years), when Asch first learned about the Hebrew poets of the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry. In a certain sense, most of the subjects of this dissertation—including the most uncompromising atheists and rebels against Jewish religious tradition, or *apikorsim*—were accompanied on their journeys by their mothers, fathers, grandparents and *melamdim* (heder teachers), and by other voices, images, and notions from their childhood that remained embedded in their language. These writers' search for self, pursued through travel and writing, was no less challenging than medieval Jewish travelers' search for the Lost Ten Tribes, traditionally presumed to be living behind the legendary river Sambation, which boiled with rocks except on the Sabbath and was therefore uncrossable.[13]

Questions of language dominated the twentieth-century Jewish cultural agenda. Indeed, in many cases a writer's choice of Yiddish over Hebrew, Russian, or Polish was itself a significant statement, reflecting aesthetic and political convictions. Examining Yiddish travel literature means entering one of the most dynamic laboratories for the development of modern literary Yiddish. The task of conveying foreign experiences in their traditionally inward-looking native tongue forced writers to be creative in their use of existing vocabulary and inspired some of them to coin neologisms. Analysis of the travelogues' language—including sentence length,

[12] Sholem Asch, *Mayn rayze iber Shpanyen* (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1930), 21.

[13] Asch 1930, 16.

foreign word use, adjectival modifiers, tenses, idioms, similes, and related narratological devices—also sheds light on the identity of the "implied reader."

The discussion of Yiddish travelogues' reliance on a shared past and communal associations can further be enriched by elements of reception theory, especially by some of the ideas of Wolfgang Iser's school, which consider a text's structure as a reflection of its author's idea of the "implied reader" and analyses creative co-production between the author and the reader.[14] Given the Jews' worldwide dispersal and the strong political and intellectual partisanship among different Yiddish writers, publishers, and periodicals, the issue of who a particular text was addressed to is of major importance for understanding its author's motivations, allegiances, and for assessing the narrator's *reliability* in the context of the work's engagement with *literariness*.

Disagreements about the status of Yiddish and about the validity of particular stylistic, grammatical, and lexical choices—whether fueled by linguistic, political, cultural or aesthetic agendas—were a persistent factor of Yiddish literary life. The important literary critic A. Almi—who was also a major Yiddish voice on many issues relevant to the subject of travel literature, including Jewish-Gentile relations, assimilation, and Western colonialism—urged his fellow writers not to lower themselves to the level of readers who, while considering themselves to be *"gantse inteligentn"* ("real intellectuals"), confused *"fonografye"* [phonography]) with *"pornografye"* [pornography] and mispronounced the Hebrew-derived "בולט" ("bold") as *bult* (instead of the correct *boylet*). According to Almi, the Yiddish writer's task was to expand the scope and richness of the language:

[14] Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

דער יידישער שרייבער קאָן זיך נישט רעכענען דערמיט,
וואָס דער לייזער „פאַרשטייט נישט דעם פשט"; וואָלט ער זיך
יאָ געריכטעט דערמיט, וואָלט אונדזער לשון געבליבן שטיין ביי
דער מדרגה פון הונדערט יאָר צוריק. ער וואָלט געווען צוגע-
קאָווען צו דער תחינה אוין זיך אפילו נישט געקענט פאַרגינען
15 דעם לוקסוס צו באַשאַפן אייגענע ווערטער [...]

> The Yiddish writer must not take into consideration the reader's potential inability to grasp the meaning; were he to take it into consideration, our language would still be on the same level as a hundred years ago. It would have remained chained to *tkhines* [traditional prayers for women in simple Yiddish] and would not even be able to afford the luxury of coining new words.

The extent to which individual writers took their readers' educational backgrounds into account, how they imagined their readers, and what they meant to accomplish by publishing their travel accounts—these questions are inseparable from the broader discussion of Yiddish travel literature as a reflection of dominant cultural discourses.

2. Existing Scholarship and Contribution

While much research has been done on Yiddish literary representations of exile and diaspora and some on travel as a theme in Yiddish fiction, hardly any scholarship exists on Yiddish non-fictional travelogues—and it is this oversight in particular that the present dissertation seeks to rectify. Considering the wealth of relevant texts and their potential for shedding light on some of the central issues in Yiddish studies and beyond, the dearth of scholarly publications on this subject is surprising. The Yiddish press aside, virtually no travelogues published in book form have been translated or studied beyond a few brief mentions and overviews. This scholarly gap applies both to obscure authors who, apart from one or two

[15] A. Almi, *Literarishe nesies* (Warsaw: M. Goldfarb, 1931), 171.

travelogues, never wrote anything else, and to those in the Yiddish literary canon, such as Sholem Asch, Yoysef Opatoshu, Peretz Hirschbein, and Melech Ravitch, all of whom were accomplished authors in other genres as well.

The exceptions only prove the rule through their explicit reference to the novelty of the topic and suggestion of the need for further research. These include Irene Eber's brief survey of Melech Ravitch's travel notes on China, which revealingly focuses on Ravitch's "profound humanism that transcended nationality" and his idea of "the hopelessness of the individual's fate."[16] Eber does not, however, engage in any extensive analysis of the stylistic and narratological features of Ravitch's text or contextualize it within either Ravitch's oeuvre or the travelogue genre.[17] Gennady Estraykh's short introduction to excerpts from the English translations of the descriptions of mid-1920s Moscow by the famous Yiddish prose writers David Bergelson and I. J. Singer similarly whets one's appetite for more detail and analysis.[18] Estraykh correctly points out that while much work has been done on the two writers' fiction, "their journalism has drawn little attention from scholars, publishers, and translators" (53). François Guesnet's recent article on the Yiddish travelogues about Mandatory Palestine by Leyb Malakh and Joseph Opatoshu is notable for its consistent emphasis on the idea that even before arriving there, a Yiddish-speaking visitor experienced Palestine as an intimately familiar place (2008).

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[16] Irene Eber. "Meylekh Ravitch in China: A Travelogue of 1935." *Transcultural reception and/et constructions transculturelles*. Festschrift for Adrian Hsia. Ed. by Monika Schmitz-Emans (2004): 115, 113.

[17] Eber's statement about Ravitch's focus on the shared humanity rather than China's exoticism is especially insightful: "In his travel diary Ravitch does not tell us about the exotic, the strange and different in China. The lives of human beings, whether in China's cities or in his native Poland, often did not differ that much from one another" (115)

[18] ("The Old and the New Together: David Bergelson's and Israel Joshua Singer's Portraits of Moscow Circa 1926–27"; 2006).

This is not to say that the existing Yiddish scholarship has not been of relevance for the present project. The general theme of travel in Yiddish fiction has been extensively treated — particularly with respect to works considered to be part of the "canon," such as Abramovitch's *Masoes Binyomin ha-shlishi* (The Travels of Benjamin the Third, 1878), I. L. Peretz's *Rayze-bilder* (Pictures from a Journey, 1891), and Yankev Glatshteyn's semi-autobiographical *Ven Yash iz geforn* (When Yash Went Forth, 1938) and *Ven Yash iz gekumen* (When Yash Came Back, 1940). Dan Miron's work, and especially his *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (1973) and *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (2000), contains many excellent insights on the perception of the outside world in Yiddish fiction—insights that have informed the work of an entire generation of Yiddish literary scholars.

Miron's idea of Yiddish literature's "Judaization" of the Gentile world is at the core of Leah Garrett's *Journeys Beyond the Pale: Yiddish Travel Writing in the Modern World* (2003)—which to this day is the most extensive study devoted specifically to travel and mobility in Yiddish fiction. While Garret's approach makes a valuable contribution to the study of fiction, it does not fully account for the diverse range of narrative perspectives found in travel writing that explicitly positions itself as non-fictional—whether Sholem Asch's 1927 travelogue of Mandate Palestine, Khaim Shoshkes's 1938 impressions of Baghdad, Samuel Wohl's 1947 account of his trip to Warsaw, or Yankev Beler's description of a visit to Nicaragua in the early 1950s. These purportedly "truthful" travelogues exhibit a tendency that stands in direct opposition to the notion of literary "Judaization": Rather than viewing the rest of the world as an extension of Jewish space, they tend to seek out the foreign precisely for the sake of its *foreignness*. The authors' urge to push the boundaries of their previous self-fashioning—to use the term

introduced by Stephen Greenblatt in his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980)—is often apparent even in those instances when they do engage in transposing alien reality into terms of their own culture.

The divergence between the non-fictional travelogue and the representation of travel in Yiddish fiction, and especially novels, reflects profound differences inherent in these two genres. The task of Yiddish novelists and short-story writers was to create fictional universes dominated by Yiddish-speaking characters—what Garrett refers to as "ahistorical mythic landscapes" (4). Accordingly, even foreign works would often be "Judaized" when translated into Yiddish, as was the case with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, despite the fact that this work's popularity with the Yiddish reader reflected a strong interest in exotic adventures.[19] In contrast, the authors of "documentary" travel accounts tended to perceive their task at least partially as that of *journalists*. Naturally, they, too—if only by virtue of writing in Yiddish—engaged in some form of Judaization. Yet their ultimate accomplishment was to strike a balance between inserting themselves into alien landscapes and not sacrificing their cultural, intellectual, and linguistic integrity. The significant differences in focus notwithstanding, *Journeys Beyond the Pale* contains a number of observations and interpretations that are directly relevant to this dissertation. Thus, Garrett's analysis of the concept of motion as a powerful metaphor of modernity has obvious parallels in journalistic travel literature. Garrett also presents a stimulating classification of the scholarly treatment of Jewish diasporic identity, suggesting that there are three main approaches, namely, thinking of Jews "in relation to the lands that they traverse" (or "as having 'legs,' not 'roots'"); adopting the Zionist perspective of considering Jews "at home on [their own] land"; and, finally, realizing that "Jews on the cusp of modernism"

[19] See Garrett's "The Jewish Robinson Crusoe," *Comparative Literature* 54, no. 3 (July 1, 2002): 215–228.

were moving "beyond 'Diaspora' and 'Zionism' in reimaging "the world as Jewish" (170-171). While Garrett expresses a clear preference for the final approach, the analysis presented in this dissertation demonstrates that there is no need to favor one over the others—they are all valid and often can even be applied to the same author. Garrett's study focuses mostly on the period from the late nineteenth century to the end of the eve of World War II and therefore contains little analysis of the profound transformation of Yiddish literature, including its perception of travel, in the wake of the Holocaust, the founding of the state of Israel, and the overall geographic, political, and linguistic transformation of the Jewish world. The treatment of the postwar period in this dissertation has been informed by the work of several scholars, and especially by the groundbreaking studies of David Roskies, Anita Norich, and Ruth Wisse. Roskies's attention to the continuities and discontinuities of intellectualism, communality, faith, secularism, and the use of memory in his *Against the Apocalypse* (1999) can be applied to the Yiddish travel writer's response to the Holocaust. The primary sources examined in this dissertation's final two chapters corroborates Roskies's contention that a study "that on the surface deals with finality, endings, disruption, and desecration is really a study in continuities and internal transformations" (9). One element of Holocaust survivors' enormous trauma was the loss of home and, more often than not, a departure for a different country. Roskies's claim that "Jewish catastrophe is a subject whose paradoxical nature—life in death—challenges some of our basic assumptions," would be true of a significant number of Yiddish travel accounts (ibid.).

Norich's *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and American Jewish Culture During the Holocaust* (2007) demonstrates a somewhat different approach to the study of Jewish literary responses to the Holocaust. Of particular relevance to the subject at hand is Norich's analysis of the shift in Yiddish writers' goals and in their relationship with their audiences, including her claim that

many authors felt "compelled to speak in quieter cadences, returning to the very audience they had castigated only a few years earlier when they had sought to write Yiddish, and themselves, into literary modernism."[20] *Discovering Exile* focuses more on issues of genre and reception than on an explicit discussion of identity, as is evident when Norich describes the postwar rise of "elegies and lamentations, which were necessarily declarative, communicative, accessible."[21] This dissertation's fifth chapter demonstrates that in the case of travel literature, the postwar formal shift that Norich identifies went hand in hand with the strengthening of the emphasis on Jewish cultural communality and authenticity, and with a simultaneous weakening of literary ambition.

Perhaps even more enlightening is Norich's *The Homeless Imagination in the Fiction of Israel Joshua Singer* (1991), in which the author argues that the notion of homelessness is a pervasive force in Singer's universe. Of particular relevance to the subject of travel is Norich's analysis of Singer's ambivalent relationship with Poland and America and his alternate devotion to and "renunciation of Yiddish literature"; her discussion of Singer's autobiographical memoir *Fun a velt vos iz nishto mer* (Of a World That Is No More, 1946); and her treatment of the novel *Yoshe Kalb* (1932), which she describes as Singer's "most intriguing depiction of a homeless wanderer" (21, 24). Ruth Wisse's *A Little Love in Big Manhattan: Two Yiddish Poets* (1988) treats similar themes in relation to the Yiddish literary movement Di yunge (The Young), in particular the examination of complex struggles with issues of identity. Wisse's examination of the phenomena of nostalgia and estrangement in American Yiddish culture offers enlightening insights on the tension between home and exile and on "the displacement of the Jew, the

[20] 27.

[21] Ibid.

immigrant, the poet [which] unveils the dislocation of man in the universe, an ontology of homelessness" (136).

Ruth Wisse's interpretation of Yankev Glatshteyn's Yash novels in her *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Language and Culture (2000)* addresses the anxiety, fear, guilt, and emotional resistance inherent in the American Jewish immigrant's experience of homecoming. "For this observer-participant," argues Wisse referring to these semiautobiographical travelogues' main character Yash, "fear of separation has displaced the fear of death. He is not anxious about confronting but about *escaping* the common fate" (176). The complex picture Wisse draws is relevant both to the discussion of both interwar travelogues of "the Old Country" and postwar texts focusing on physical and mental "homecomings" in the wake of Jewish Europe's annihilation.

Marc Caplan's "The Fragmentation of Narrative Perspective in Y. L. Peretz's '*Bilder fun a Provints-Rayze"*' (2007) centers on the narratological features of what the author characterizes as "the first important example of genuine travel writing in Yiddish literature" (64). Caplan astutely comments on the travelogue genre: "Though the travelogue claims to render a "foreign" culture comprehensible, it is the author, rather than the culture he or she describes, who is really foreign and inassimilable. Travel literature therefore begins with a deficit of knowledge, an inscription of ignorance—a formal paradox made all the more profound when the traveling narrator is visiting not a foreign space but his native one" (74). Peretz's *"Bilder"* is constructed as a first-person narrative, and the degree of its fictionality, as in the case of Glatshteyn's Yash novels, cannot be fully established, although some of its features would warrant its placement closer to the fiction side of the continuum. Caplan's claim that this work "introduces the travel

narrative as a new model for Yiddish fiction" complements and complicates Garrett's own analysis (74).

Jeffrey Shandler's *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (2008) offers a stimulating analysis of the role of memory and the use of the past in contemporary Jewish culture's engagement with Yiddish—not so much with the Yiddish language, as with the *idea* of Yiddish. Even though Shandler's focus is on the "postvernacular" use of Yiddish, some of his ideas have relevance to postwar Yiddish literature's tendency to create mythical spaces and symbolic representations of the past. Nils Roemer presents an interesting treatment of the subject of Jewish memory with regard to a specific location in his "The City of Worms in Modern Jewish Traveling Cultures of Remembrance" (2004). One of the three cities, along with Speier and Meinz, of the famous "ShUM" constellation of the earliest centers of Ashkenazic civilization, Worms has always occupied a place of honor in Yiddish culture's mental map of Europe. Roemer gives a brief summary of the history of the Jewish travel to Worms during the interwar period, mentioning visits by Sholem Asch and the latter's three short pieces on Worms and Meinz. Roemer's analysis is more historical than literary, but his assessment of a passage from philosopher Martin Buber's travel notes as an instance of "the reappropriation of local history from a modernist agenda" points to the interaction between travelogues and modern Yiddish literature (84).

Many other studies of Yiddish and Jewish literature, culture, and history are relevant to the topic of this dissertation. Barbara Henry's *Rewriting Russia—Jacob Gordin's Yiddish Drama* (2011) offers a valuable discussion of the famous playwright's perception of immigration, borders, and the geographic and cultural divide between the New World and the Old Country, as expressed both in his plays and in some of his non-dramatic writings. Gordin's 1907

autobiographical essay *"A yidishe shtetl bam rusishn grenets"* (A Jewish Shtetl at the Russian Border) includes a description of his experience crossing the Polish-Russian border, "a symbolically loaded scene" that highlights the complexity and subjectivity of the notions of boundaries, foreignness, and belonging. As Henry points out, the scene's symbolism centers on separation: "the river separating the past from the present, the person you were from the one you have become, life from death, stillness from motion. The Russian and Polish-Jewish landscapes are almost identical – the same blue skies and green fields are on either side of the border – but they are ever separate, barred by artificial but uncrossable borders" (161). The issue of borders, whether geographic, political, linguistic, or mythical, occupies an important place in this dissertation's treatment of travelogues, and Henry's observations suggest a productive analytic framework.

Works on Jewish sociopolitical history and on the general history of specific regions are indispensable for this study, in particular when it comes to the subject of immigration. One example of a relevant study is Michael Blakeney's "Proposals for a Jewish Colony in Australia—1938-1948" (1984), which follows the history of Jewish colonization projects in Australia's Kimberley region and the division that such proposals caused in Australian society. In addition to their other implications, the historical facts presented by Blakeney are helpful for understanding the social environment—including various prejudices and misconceptions—that a Jewish traveler or immigrant faced in Australia and beyond.

Given the high proportion of Polish Jews among the travel writers discussed in this dissertation, publications by Polish historians and literary critics are especially pertinent. Work by Stanislaus Blejwas focuses on Polish discourse on education, secularism, and nationalism, and traces the effects of its early-twentieth-century transformation on Jewish-Gentile relations. In

"Polish Positivism and the Jews" (1984), Blejwas examines the crisis of the nineteenth-century ideology of assimilationism advanced by a number of Polish intellectuals, including such notable figures as Bolesław Prus, Eliza Orzeszkowa, and Aleksander Świętochowski. Rooted in the ideals of the Enlightenment and positivism, this ideology conveyed a belief in the possibility of achieving the peaceful coexistence of Jews and Poles. The route by which this harmony was meant to be reached was Jews' assimilation and integration into Polish society and culture.

From a somewhat different angle, Polish Romantic poets, most notably Adam Mickiewicz, advanced their own visions of a Polish-Jewish unity, with strong nationalist and mystical overtones. By the turn of the twentieth century, a significant minority of secularized Jews had adopted some of these ideas, and the phenomenon of Polish-Jewish cultural and political association had become an important factor in many Yiddish writers' perceptions of Europe and Christianity. Świętochowski's 1925 memoirs, which Blejwas quotes, reflect the characteristic evolution of a Polish nationalist's attitude toward Jews: "I admit only to the name of an evolutionist in philosophy and a national humanist in sociology. For this reason, fifty years ago, I defended Jews when they wished to be Poles, and for these same reasons I do not defend them today, when they wish to be Jews, enemies of the Poles" (33). The steady growth of anti-Jewish sentiments following Poland's declaration of independence in 1918; the legacy of the ideals of Polish-Jewish friendship; and a variety of prejudices, fears, and disappointments on both sides had a profound affect on the Polish Jews' view of Poland and their general perception of the cultural Other.

The recently published Polish-language volume *Europejczyk w Podróże* (The European on a Journey), edited by literary scholars Ewa Ihnatowicz and Stefan Ciary (2010) contains a number of excellent analyses of Polish writers' engagement with the travelogue genre in the

context of interwar Poland's cultural and political environment. Grażyna Legutko's "Europejskie wędrówki młodopolskiego rewolucjonisty- przypadek Gustawa Daniłowskiego" (European Wanderings of Young Poland Revolutionary—the Case of Gustaw Daniłowski), which examines the prose of the Young Poland socialist writer Gustaw Daniłowski, discusses the methodological challenge of separating a travelogue's fictional elements from the author's actual experiences, particularly in the presence of a strong political theme (367-385). Magdalena Sadlik's *"'Oglądam to, co jest najdroższe i najświętsze dla każdego chrześcijanina'"—wędrówki do źródeł kultury europejskiej"* ("I am Seeing What is the Precious and Holiest for Every Christian"—Journeys to the Sources of European Culture) (37-48) provides useful information on writings by Polish pilgrims to the Holy Land—an illuminating counterpart to Jewish travelogues of *Erets-Yisroel* (the Land of Israel). Commenting on the differences between the religious perception of travel and the secular one, Sadlik argues that for a pilgrim, *"obczyzna wychodzi więc tu na spotkanie ze swojszczyzną, a egzotyka schodzi na dalszy plan, gdyż pielgrzymów podążających do duchowej ojczyzny nie interesuje - w przeciwieństwie do większości turystów - poznanie odmiennej kultury"* ("as the foreign meets the own, the exotic recedes into the background, since it is of no interest to pilgrims, who seek a spiritual homeland—in contrast to the majority of tourists, who want to learn about another culture"; 41). It is striking to consider the extent to which analogous Yiddish sources complicate and challenge Sadlik's model.

No less relevant than the scholarship on Poland is the rich field of Russian literary studies, including comparative analyses of cross-cultural tendencies and influences. Izabela Kalinowska's *Between East and West—Polish and Russian nineteenth-century travel to the Orient* (2004) and Alexander Etkind's *Tolkovanie puteshestviy. Rossiia i Amerika v travelogakh i*

intertekstakh (The Interpretation of Travels: Russia and America in Travelogues and Intertexts, 2001) and *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (2011) demonstrate the usefulness of colonial and postcolonial criticism to the study of Eastern Europe.

Given the important role that politics and ideology played in interwar Yiddish travelogues—especially in those that described trips to the Soviet Union—analysis of Russian-language Soviet travelogues offers a revealing comparative perspective. As Francine Hirsch illustrates in her "Getting to Know 'The Peoples of the USSR': Ethnographic Exhibits as Soviet Virtual Tourism, 1923-1934" (2003) and her pioneering study *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge & the Making of the Soviet Union* (2005), the travelogue and related genres such as the ethnography became a tool of the Soviet propaganda machine and nation-building early on in the Soviet period. Special "writers' brigades" would be sent to places such as Central Asian republics and tasked with helping create a Sovietized version of a local culture, which could include the development of writing systems, publication of folklore materials, assisting local writers in the production of works that would be "ideologically useful." Travel accounts in book form and in the Soviet press were an essential part of this nation-wide policy. Accordingly, the Soviet travel writer's perspective was inherently selective and largely bound to a clear set of ideological rules and expectations.

It is particularly revealing to consider Soviet travel writers' accounts of the West and to examine and to contrast them with non-Soviet communist Yiddish writers' impressions of the same destinations. Largely ignored by Russian scholars during the Soviet period and still little known in the West, Soviet travelogues of such places as the United States, Great Britain, and France, have only recently begun to draw researchers' attention in Russia and abroad. The resulting scholarship, as well as the travelogues themselves, can deepen one's understanding of

the ideological and stylistic pressure experienced by writers who aligned themselves with communism.

Two recent groundbreaking studies by Yevgeniy Ponomarev – *Tipologiia sovetskogo puteshestviia* (The Typology of the Soviet Journey, 2011) and *Proshchai, Evropa! Puteshestvie na zapad kak zhanr sovetskoi literatury mezhvoennogo perioda* (Farewell, Europe! Travel to the West as a Genre of Interwar Soviet Literature, 2011) – combine some of the achievements of Western critical theory with an extensive analysis of Russian sources. Ponomarev argues that, while Soviet travelogues tended to be dominated by the state's agenda, their authors' actual perception of reality was often quite different. Scrutinizing the narrative and stylistic features of literary texts with the aim of detecting their potential omissions and their concealed references and allusions, Ponomarev presents a revealing study of the potential divergences between perception and expression.

Ponomarev's analysis of such works as Il'f and Petrov's *Odnoetazhnaia Amerika* (One-Storied America, 1936)—one of the few Soviet travelogues available in English translation (2007)—highlights Soviet travelogues' potential relevance for the subject of this dissertation. An account of the Il'f and Petrov's trip across the United States in late 1935–early 1936, *One-Storied America* stands out for the relative inconspicuousness and subtlety of its ideological agenda. Even so, however, the text conveys a highly selective picture and presents in a positive light solely those aspects of American life that would reflect well on the Soviet Union. Even those features that are portrayed as worth emulating, such as the United States' industrial development, are introduced in a way that implies the Soviet Union's potential to soon correct, and, eventually, reverse, the disparity.

As Ponomarev's study demonstrates, Il'f and Petrov's work is just one example in a long list of Soviet travelogues that includes such works as Vladimir Maiakovskii's *Moe otkrytie Ameriki* (My Discovery of America, 1925), Mikhail Slonimskii's *Zapadniki* (Westernizers, 1927), Ilya Ehrenburg's *Viza vremeni* (The Time Visa, 1928), Vera Inber's *Amerika v Parizhe* (America in Paris, 1928), Ol'ga Forsh's *Pod kupolom* (Under the Dome, 1929), and Lev Nikulin's *Sem' morei* (The Seven Seas, 1936). Based on Ponomarev's presentation of these sources, it emerges that in contrast to non-Soviet Yiddish communist writers, who tended to position their work within the larger Jewish political discourse and were especially eager to prove communism's superiority over Zionism, Soviet travelers (including those of Jewish background), whose readership was almost exclusively internal, tended to be less interested in convincing potential opponents than in adhering to the demands of an intrusive and sinister censorship apparatus. Analysis of the resulting stylistic and thematic differences between the two categories of texts has the potential to enrich one's understanding of both.

Bernard Schweizer's important study *Radicals on The Road: The Politics of English Travel Writing in the 1930s* (2001) demonstrates that the literary impulse may sometimes suppress and override the author's political agenda, as in the case of George Orwell's early work, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933): "The picturesque and imaginatively estranged nature of his descriptions overrides any particular social concern" (21). Schweizer's approach complements that of Ponomarev, as it examines works by writers who—whatever the pressures they were under—did not have to face the sharp eye of a totalitarian regime. Many Yiddish travel writers found themselves caught somewhere in the middle: Their journeys were often precipitated by specific assignments by newspapers or political organizations that had strong and unbending ideological agendas.

Paul Fussell's *Abroad* (1980), another valuable contribution to the study of interwar British travel writing, also focuses on the political context. Indeed, when it comes to the European and American travelogue of the 1920s and 1930s, the focus on politics is virtually inevitable. The deep ideological divisions characterizing the social discourse are part of what makes this period's travel writing complex and illuminating and, according to Fussell, what results in the genre's highest achievements. Richard Popp's *The Holiday Makers—Magazines, Advertising, and Mass Tourism in Postwar America* (2012) is relevant to the discussion of postwar Yiddish travelogues in this dissertation's final chapter, especially of travelogues by authors who were by then based in the United States. Any discussion of American and European travel writing in the postwar era must account for the 1950s rise of mass tourism and the culture of vacationing, accompanied by the quick development of an advertisement industry designed to instill wanderlust in potential customers.

Travel writing has been at the center of the scholarly discourse within the humanities for several decades now, owing greatly to postcolonial studies, feminist criticism, and to recent research centered on globalization and the digital revolution. Thinkers and critics including Edward Said, Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Spivak, James Clifford, Homi Bhabha, and Stephen Greenblatt have considered the figure of the traveler from a wide variety of perspectives. With the aid of wide-ranging theories of orientalism, eurocentrism, phallocentrism, logocentrism, and other "*(centr)isms*," these scholars have questioned, unmasked, denounced, and deconstructed the notions of travel and the Other, with the goal of identifying ways in which one's perception of other people and places is conditioned by ideology and discourse. Edward Said's ideas about the West's exoticization and concomitant domination of the East, as formulated in his classic *Orientalism* (1978), have been especially influential in the study of travel writing in different

languages. The diversity of scholarship on travel writing is well represented in *Travel Writing, Form, and Empire: The Poetics and Politics of Mobility* (2009), edited by Julia Kuehn and Paul Smethurst; *Writing, Travel and Empire: Colonial Narratives of Other Cultures* (2007); edited by Peter Hulme and Russell McDougall; and *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* (2002), edited by Hulme and Tim Youngs.

Mary Louise Pratt's seminal study *Imperial Eyes* (1992) examines European travelogues of Africa and the Americas written between 1750 and 1980, and offers insights on the nature of travel, the peculiarities of the Eurocentric perspective, the relation between the self and the Other, the European notion of discovery, travel writers' special use of metaphors, and the place of travel literature within literary studies. One of Pratt's innovative ideas is the need to carefully distinguish between travelers and local residents, or "travelees"—a relationship she insists on treating "not in terms of separateness […], but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (7). Naturally, not all of Pratt's ideas are applicable to the Yiddish case. Thus, her interpretation of mass tourism's effect on travel literature as a sign of writers' "bitter nostalgia for lost idioms of discovery and domination [in] response to […] the depravity of 'development' and the tastelessness of tourism," does not accurately reflect the postwar situation in Yiddish travelogues (224). As Chapter 5 of this dissertation will argue, the cultural and psychological consequences of the Holocaust and the steady decline in the numbers of Yiddish writers and readers led to the development of a strikingly different paradigm of nostalgia and the possibilities of tourism.

Pratt's condemnation of the many authors whom she considers to be guilty of objectifying, degrading, and dehumanizing, the colonial and post-colonial people and landscapes constitutes a major theme of her book and manifests itself in her referring to "[Alberto]

Moravia's *embarrassing* introduction to something he generically calls 'African landscape'" and Paul Fussell's "crescendo of arrogance," in addition to accusing Paul Theroux of carrying out "the ideological project of third worldism and white supremacy" (219, 220; emphasis mine). Even though Yiddish travel writing, too, raises complex moral issues and contains examples of authorial prejudice, one of the methodological aims in this dissertation has been to avoid such condemnatory rhetoric and to view its subjects in the Foucauldian context of a particular period's "discourses" and "discursive formations."

James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* (1988) is notable for its treatment of the notions of authenticity, the exotic, and "ethnographic authority," as well as its conceptualization of modernity in light of the critic Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of polyphony and dialogism. Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions* (2003), which focuses on Europe's representation of non-Europeans during the late medieval and early modern period, introduces a highly useful notion of "wonder" as a statement of one's superiority and power and "an agent of appropriation" (Greenblatt 1991: 24)

A number of studies, such as, for instance, Frances Bartkowski's *Travelers, Immigrants, Inmates - Essays in Estrangement* (1995), have used the prism of psychoanalysis to approach the relationship between travel and the construction of identity. Her study demonstrates that analysis of the traveler's experience of defamiliarization can potentially be enriched by drawing on some of Jacques Lacan's ideas, such as his notion of one's *desire* as being based on one's understanding of the Other's desire, or his understanding of the "relational," i.e. defined in relation to the Other, and inherently incoherent nature of a person's identity. "The demands placed upon the subject in situations of unfamiliarity and dislocation," notes Bartkowski, "produce a scene in which the struggle for identity comes more clearly into view as both

necessary and also mistaken" (xix). Yet the example of Bartkowski's work also makes it clear that the Lacanian approach, which places so much emphasis on the application of abstract psychoanalytic principles to the workings of the human psyche, tends to interfere with the researcher's ability to gain a deep understanding of specific phenomena within a particular culture.

Finally, some of the most enlightening analyses of the travelogue genre come from travel writers themselves. In this regard, the work of Bruce Chatwin, one of the most accomplished English language travel writers of the second half of the twentieth century, stands out for its eloquence and astuteness. In his essay "I Always Wanted to Go to Patagonia", Chatwin describes his unrealized book project, tentatively titled *Anatomy of Restlessness* (3 – 14). Building on the French philosopher Blaise Pascal's adage that "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone," Chatwin suggests that "a migratory 'drive'" may lie at the very core of being human (12). This dissertation's use of the notion of restlessness to describe Jewish culture has much in common with Chatwin's interpretation of the term. In "The Nomadic Alternative," Chatwin discusses a wide range of human urges, instincts, and aspirations that, according to him, create "a compulsion to wander and a compulsion to return" (76). In the context of this dissertation, Chatwin's brief reference to the theme of "The Wandering Jew" is especially significant:

> The Jewish diaspora obviously violates every attempt to categorize it. I would think it worth a chapter to itself. Title—? "The Wandering Jew"—a daunting subject. There are two questions I would like to ask—Was Jewish "exclusivism" kept alive by the loss of the "Promised Land," their tribal territory? and were their energies diverted as a result towards the nomad's other great stand-by—portable gold? (82)

Chatwin died in 1989 at the age of forty-eight without completing his book project, leaving the above two questions about Jewish wandering unanswered. While these questions may at first

glance strike one as rather superficial or even prejudiced, they can be interpreted on many different levels. Their key terms and notions, including physical space, nomadism, value system, universality and exclusivity, are directly relevant to this dissertation's analysis of Yiddish travel literature.

Analysis of Yiddish travel literature has much to offer to fields other than Yiddish and Jewish studies; its implications have relevance for Slavic studies, anthropology, religion, linguistics, and a wide variety of other fields and disciplines. Yiddish literature's complex relationship with European cultures and languages, its ambiguous identification with both the West and the East, and its position as a relative latecomer to the European literary scene, provoke new questions and challenge accepted assumptions, frameworks, and definitions.

While sharing many characteristics with its non-Jewish counterparts, Yiddish travel writing operates within strikingly different emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and literary demarcations that are shaped by the peculiar position of Yiddish culture vis-à-vis such binaries as *Europeanness* and *Otherness*, the Occident and the Orient, Christianity and anti-Christianity, the notion of divine chosenness and the vulnerability of a persecuted minority. These contextual factors make Yiddish travel writing an especially fertile ground for broader theoretical investigations.

This dissertation contributes to the field of Yiddish studies by bringing prolific and original authors out of undeserved obscurity and providing a fresh perspective on canonical writers through analysis of their lesser-known writings. Indeed, the travelogue genre's journalistic and diaristic features lend it a degree of flexibility and spontaneity that the same authors' fictional works often lack. I. J. Singer addresses this point in his prefatory note to *Nay Rusland*, "apologizing" to the reader for the supposed rawness of his travel notes: *"Ikh gefin*

derbay far neytik oyfmerkzam tsu makhn, az di bilder un ayndrukn zenen geshribn gevorn afn moment, vi ale mol ba rayzes, mistome nisht genug geshlifn, nisht pretsiz, un als azelkhe bet ikh zey oyftsupasn" ("I find it necessary at this point to mention that these pictures and impressions were recorded on the spur of the moment, as always happens on a journey, and are probably not sufficiently polished or precise—and so I ask them to be treated as such.")[22] In referring to his travelogue's unscripted style as something that "*always* happens on a journey," Singer is relying on the common perception and well-established conventions of the genre.

A good example of a travelogue that can shed light on its author's other writings is Sholem Asch's *Mayn rayze iber Shpanyen* (My Journey Through Spain; 1930), which sheds light on this author's later exploration of Christian themes in his Christological trilogy begun in the late 1930s. In his travel account, Asch records visiting a Spanish art museum and observing depictions of various scenes from the New Testament in a manner that reveals a profound fascination with the Christian psyche and the figure of Jesus in particular:

דאָס פּנים דריקט אויס מענשלי׳כע יסורים, פּיזישע פּיין, קיין איין הויך פּוּן גייסט׳לי׳קייט, פּון הימל׳לישקייט, נור ערדישקייט אוּן ערדישקייט. יסורים, מאַטעריעלישען, פּיין, אַזוי ווי יעדער מאָל׳ט געפּייניגט געוואָרען אויף א משפּט פּון א אינקווי׳זיציע. דאָס פּאָל׳ק זעהט דאָס, עס זעהט מענש׳לי׳כע יסורים. עס פּערשטעהט עס, עס רוּדערט אין איהם אויף די שטאַרקסטע עמאָציעס. זיין האַרץ ווערט אָנגעפּיל׳לט מיט רחמים פּאַר זיין גאָט, אוּן בעגאָסטן מיט כּעס אויף זיינע פּיניגער. ער ווערט מיטאַריינגעצויגען אין א לעבעדיגען פּראָצעס, ווּאָס שמעקט מיט בלוט. ער דענקט נישט, ער קלערט נישט. — די אמונה ווערט פּערוואַנדעל׳ט אין א לי׳דענשאַפט, דאָס ווּאָס אמונה זאָל זיין.[23]

> His face expresses human suffering, physical pain, but not a trace of spirituality, of the divine—it's earth and earth only. Jesus's suffering, torment, and pain are such as if he were tortured at a trial by the Inquisition. People look at this and see human suffering. They can understand it; it triggers their emotions. Their hearts fill with compassion for their God and are overflown with anger at his tormenters. They enter a state of excitement that smells of blood. These people don't think or

[22] Israel Joshua Singer, *Nay Rusland [1926-1927]* (Warsaw: Kh. Bzhoza, 1939), 6.

[23] Asch 1930: 36.

> consider—the faith is transformed into a passion—and passion is what faith must be always.

The connotations of violence in this passage build upon the work's earlier depiction of a bullfight as a bacchanalian celebration of man's animal instincts. The complexities and dark ironies inherent in combining Christianity, the Inquisition, Jews, blood, crowds, and the scene of Jesus's crucifixion are lost neither on the author nor on the reader, and they have significant implications both for analyzing this travelogue and for interpreting the rest of Asch's legacy.

The study of modern Yiddish travel literature provides a uniquely revealing window on the evolution of Jewish identity over the course of the twentieth century, which saw the crumbling of traditional lifestyle, mass emigration, the Yiddish publishing boom and subsequent decline, and the brutal reality of physical annihilation. As literary critic Sh. Margoshes writes, referring to Peretz Hirschbein: *"Vos hot er gezukht af zayne nesies iber der velt oyb nit dem zin fun yid-zayn un di marokhe fun yidn fun mizrekh biz mayrev, fun tsofn biz dorem?"* ("What was he looking for on his world journeys, if not for the meaning of being a Jew and for the destiny of Jews from East to West, North to South?")[24] The *meaning* of Jewishness, or, to use Benjamin Harshav's expression, the "meaning of Yiddish," is inseparable from the search for a home, for a sense of belonging, for a definite cultural, linguistic and religious identity. While other types of Yiddish writing can also be illuminating on these issues, the personal perspective of the travelogue gives this genre a certain immediacy that other genres do not possess. No other category of Yiddish sources of such scope and potential has received so little attention from scholars, and it is high time this gap was corrected.

[24] Niger and Elkin, 198.

3. Questions of Scope and Methodology

The ubiquity of travel-related themes in Yiddish culture presents a formidable methodological challenge when it comes to determining the genre's precise boundaries and limiting the range of relevant primary sources. At the same time, the very notion of travel is characterized by a certain degree of vagueness: travel occurs for many different reasons and takes a variety of forms. Throughout the twentieth century, East European Jews went on journeys as immigrants, pilgrims, refugees, journalists, writers, artists, musicians, actors, entrepreneurs, scholars, tourists, official representatives of political and communal organizations, and in many other capacities. Those who gave committed their impressions to paper included not only professional writers, but also individuals who had never published anything before. What goals, obligations, and needs motivated a person to author a travelogue? How did one's background and personal circumstances affect one's thematic and stylistic choices? To what extent did travelogues' depictions of reality follow factual reality, and is it possible to distinguish between the fictional and the non-fictional branches of the travelogue genre?

The problem of distinguishing between truth and fiction in literature is, of course, not limited to a particular genre. Yet rather than emphasize these travelogues' historical veracity or lack thereof, this study uses literary and cultural tools of analysis to examine how events are *perceived* and *represented.* The Yiddish journalist Pinye Katz's introduction to Marcus Parishevski's 1920s travelogue of Peru explicitly addresses the unreliability of travel writers:

> די אלע באשרייבונגען פון די לענדער און זייערע באוואוינער האָבן קיינמאל נישט גענאָמען דעם פולן צוטרוי פון דער ווייסנשאפט. אין די רייזנדער האָט מען׳ אראנק זייער נענויגטקייט צו אַוואַנטורע, געזען מערסטנס בעלי־גוזמא, פאנטאסטן, ווען מיט זייער גאנצער ארנטלעכ־ קייט, האָבן די זאכן געמוזט אויסזען אין זייערע אויגן פארגרעסערט, לע־ געַנדאריש און פאבלחאפטיק.[25]

[25] Marcus Parishevsky, Tsvishn vilde un tsivilizirte : a bashrayburg fun a rayze iber peruaner berg un velder: tsvishn tsivilizirte yishuvim un indianer shvotim (Buenos Aires: [G. Kaplanski?], 1944), 3.

> Such descriptions of foreign countries and people have never been taken seriously by scholars. In light of their characteristic adventurousness, travelers were primarily perceived as spinners of yarns and fantasizers who, even when trying to remain truthful, imagined things to be greater, more impressive and more mythical than they were in reality.

Katz's comment is little more than a rhetorical device designed to reinforce this particular travelogue's trustworthiness. After all, this particular travel account was intended not as a scholarly text, but primarily as a book for general Yiddish readers curious about a fellow East European Jewish immigrant's impressions of a cultural landscape that was sharply different from their shared background in Poland, Ukraine, and the rest of Yiddishland. Yet even a travelogue such as Parishevski's highlights this genre's inherent potential to produce both skepticism and the urge to suspend one's disbelief.

Travel accounts have always held a particular appeal for people who could not travel on their own and thus sought the vicarious enjoyment of someone else's adventures. This was especially true at the peak of the Yiddish travelogue's popularity, which took place before the arrival of mass air travel, television, and the internet. Given travel writers' relative impunity at the time, the temptation to deviate from the factual truth should be assumed to have been a strong factor in the case of some of them. Had readers decided to retrace their favorite travelogue's itinerary, they might in many cases have discovered instances of embellishment, distortion, and outright fabrication. Not that this potential for exposing the writers was of much consequence. The excitement of adventure and the aura of mystery were of far more importance.

The usually interchangeable terms "travel literature" and "travel writing" have traditionally been used by scholars to refer to both fictional and non-fictional works that describe journeys, and the same applies to the terms for individual works within this genre, including "travelogue" and "travel account." Thus, both Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and

Charles Dickens's *American Notes* (1842) fall within the realm of travel literature. In order to avoid unnecessary ambiguity, this dissertation, unless otherwise noted, uses the aforementioned terms in reference to non-fictional texts only. This is not to say that it is possible to avoid all ambiguity by dividing works about travel into "fictional" accounts and "non-fictional" ones, as the boundary between the two is inherently nebulous. This dissertation's approach to this issue relies in part on Philippe Lejeune's theory of "the autobiographical pact," which proposes that the distinction between the biography and the autobiography should be based "upon analysis, on the global level of publication, of the implicit or explicit contract proposed by the a*uthor to* the *reader,* a contract which determines the mode of reading of the text."[26]

When, around the turn of the twentieth century, the American traveler and photographer Burton Holmes coined the word "travelogue," he intended it to describe the new lecture format that he had pioneered. In his lectures, which quickly grew popular, Holmes told stories about the various places he had visited, supplementing his oral narratives with photographs and later with motion pictures. It will never be fully known how much of what Burton told his listeners was based on facts and how much was a result of an unwitting mistake, a product of his imagination, or a straightforward fabrication. Nevertheless, the difference between a "travelogue" of Burton's and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), for instance, is easily perceptible. The former was both presented and, more importantly, perceived, as a factual account of the traveler's real-life experiences, while the latter was conceived as a novel and has consistently been treated as a work of fiction, even if a semiautobiographical one, by readers. The extent to which Kerouac's narrative reflects his and Neal Cassady's actual odysseys across America is, from this methodological standpoint, of secondary importance.

[26] Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact." *On Autobiography.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989: 29.

The perception of travelogues among Jews and in other cultures has undergone noticeable changes over the centuries of the genre's existence, both with regard to the issue of truthfulness and in other respects. As conveyed by the Yiddish proverb "*Azoy vi es kristlt zikh, azoy yidlt zikh*" ("As do the Christians, so do the Jews"), the Ashkenazic civilization, including its literature, did not exist in a vacuum. If at times with a significant delay, Yiddish writing went through many of the same stages as could be observed among its Gentile counterparts. Beginning in antiquity and until as late as the nineteenth century, travel accounts were treated as important sources of information about other geographic regions. This emphasis on factuality helped to shape the largely impersonal style of pre-modern travelogues: many presented dry summaries of travelers' itineraries, complete with lists of names, measurements, and prices, but few, if any, mentions of the authors' private thoughts or emotions. As historical sources, such works retain their importance to this day, yet they hardly serve as effective windows onto the travelers' inner worlds.

Readers were drawn to travelogues' aura of factuality for either practical reasons, as in the case of merchants or explorers contemplating a journey, or for the possibility of diversion, as in the case of those attracted to the described places' magical inaccessibility. Considering the dearth of information about many parts of the world and the travelers' innocent or intentional misrepresentations, some of the resulting accounts contained elements that were improbable or outright fantastical: from the Antipodes and Antichtones of antiquity and the Middle Ages, variously believed to be dog-, ape-, or chest-headed, to the confused reports of gorillas in the nineteenth century.

The roughly four and a half centuries of European exploration and colonial expansion—from the beginning of the Age of Discovery in the fifteenth century until the "Scramble for

Africa" in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries—greatly contributed to the genre's growth in scope and popularity. In the context of colonialism and concurrent scientific and technological progress, the travelogue became more topical and potentially satisfying than ever before. Travel and travel literature satisfied curiosity and at the same time offered confirmation of the colonial power's superiority, as Edward Said has influentially suggested.[27] The Romantic era gave rise to a new type of travelogue: subjective, introspective, private, and poetic. Adumbrated by Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), this new mode of travel writing reached its height in the works of such authors as Flaubert, Nerval and Chateaubriand in the mid-nineteenth century. Travel writers of the last two centuries have experimented with a wide variety of styles, themes, and formats and have included such famous figures as Heinrich Heine, Charles Dickens, Henry James, Robert Louis Stevenson, Mary Kingsley, John Steinbeck, and Evelyn Waugh.

The Yiddish case must be examined in this broader context, if only to demonstrate that it often followed its own logic, as the specifically Jewish concerns and social transformations affecting its development did not necessarily coincide with the general European "timetable." It was in the Middle Ages that Jewish travel writing became a major genre of Hebrew literature. Most medieval Jewish travelogues described ritual pilgrimages to the land of Israel, visits to distant Jewish communities, or speculations about the whereabouts of the Ten Lost Tribes. It could be argued that the pre-modern period of the Jewish travelogue lasted until the middle of the nineteenth century and thus included such authors as Israel Joshua Benjamin, also known as "Benjamin the Second," whose journeys between 1846 and 1855 resembled the style and

[27] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1977).

concerns of his predecessors, such as Eldad ha-Dani in the ninth century, Benjamin of Tudela and Rabbi Petachia of Ratisbon in the twelfth, and Moses Bassola in the sixteenth.

The spread of the Haskalah in Eastern Europe and the broad changes in Jewish society transformed the face of both Hebrew and Yiddish writing. By the late nineteenth century, the fruits of the maskilic call for "coming out of the ghetto" had contributed to the rise of what is generally known as "modern Yiddish culture." As the native language of the overwhelming majority of European Jews, Yiddish became a dominant medium of education, modernity, and secularization. The flourishing Yiddish publishing industry accordingly foregrounded foreign places, cultures, and languages, releasing books about popular science, foreign language manuals, atlases, lexicons, and encyclopedias. Indeed, many of these new publications were translations or adaptions from the Russian, German, French, Polish, English, and other European languages, and included Yiddish-language editions of Jules Verne's novels, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and Henry Stanley's book *How I Found Livingstone*. Even the particular popularity of Jonathan Swift's explicitly fictional and allegorical *Gulliver's Travels* in part reflected Yiddish readers' fascination with places and situations markedly different from their own surroundings and redolent of new opportunities.

By the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, travel accounts became a common genre of original Yiddish writing not only in book form but also in the press. From its humble beginnings in *Kol-Mevaser*, published from 1862 to 1872 as the Yiddish supplement to the Hebrew periodical *Hamelits*, to its virtual disappearance at the beginning of World War II, the Yiddish press boasted hundreds of newspapers, magazines, and almanacs. Both types of sources are vital for the researcher of Yiddish travel literature: while books tend to be more easily identifiable and to boast better legibility, it was the Yiddish press that allowed people

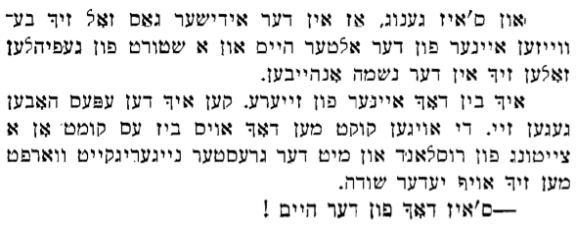
unable to publish books to make their voices heard. Accordingly, it is materials from the press that display a greater variety of names and subjects and often possess a greater degree of authenticity and immediacy.

The difference is especially apparent in the case of works that first appeared in newspapers and were only later collected into complete books. These include some of the most notable Yiddish travelogues of the interwar period. It stands to reason that it was in their earlier appearances that such materials enjoyed bigger audiences: Poland's two leading Yiddish newspapers *Haynt* (1908–1939) and *Der moment* (1910–1939) claimed readerships of 100,000 each, far exceeding the print run of any individual travelogue. It is because of this practice of republication that the reviewer of the latest book by Shoshkes took care to ensure potential readers that *"der interes tsu Shoshkes' rayze-bashraybungen farklenert zikh nisht tsulib dem, vos zey zenen shoyn geven farefntlekht in 'Haynt' un in andere yidishe tsaytungen, onheybndik fun yor 1930 biz 1935. Zey hobn nisht farloyrn in zeyer frishkeyt"* ("the appeal of Shoshkes's travel descriptions is not diminished by their previous publications in *Haynt* and other Yiddish newspapers between the years 1930 and 1935. They have not lost their freshness.").[28][29] The worldwide availability of the major Yiddish newspapers played an important role in helping immigrants to remain abreast of the latest news from the Old Country and to preserve an emotional connection to the cultural environment they had left behind and often intensely missed. Hirschbein's account of his 1914 journey to South America contains a moving description of his visit to a Jewish agricultural colony deep in the Argentinian pampas.

[28] Hirsh Abramovitsh, "Leyenendik (D"r Kh. Shoshkes — ekzotishe rayzes....)," *Literarishe bleter* no. 38 (749) (1938): 632

[29] Abramovitsh (1938).

Hirschbein stresses the colonists' intense homesickness, specifically referring to their emotional dependence on European Yiddish newspapers:[30]


און ס׳איז גענוג, אז אין דער אידישער גאס זאל זיך בע־
ווייזען אייניער פון דער אלטער היים און א שטורט פון געפיהלען
זאלען זיך אין דער נשמה אנהייבען.
איך בין דאך אייניער פון זייערע. קען איך דען עפעס האבען
געגען זיי. די אויגען קוקט מען דאך אוים ביז עס קומט אן א
צייטונג פון רוסלאנד און מיט דער גרעסטער נייגעריגקייט ווארפט
מען זיך אויף יעדער שורה.
—ס׳איז דאך פון דער היים !

> It's enough for someone from the Old Country to appear in the Jewish street for a storm of feelings to rise in their hearts.
>
> I'm one of their own, and I can have no complaints against them. Don't they overstrain their eyes from looking to see if the latest newspaper issue has arrived from Russia? And with what interest they swallow every line! After all, it came all the way from home!

It is no coincidence that in discussing the immigrants' connections with Europe, Hirschbein mentions the press before anything else. Considering the great distances and the difficulty of travel, newspapers were arguably the most reliable and up-to-date link to the "metropolitan" Jewish world of Eastern Europe.

In addition to travelogues proper, this study considers a number of works that cannot be categorized as travelogues per se and yet contain either explicit travel descriptions or else passages that shed light on the cultural discourse of the period and on prevailing connotations of travel or specific geographic destinations. These sources include memoirs, autobiographies, essays and a small number of fictional works, including novels, poems, and dramas. Indeed, this study assumes that a given source can be relevant even if the subject of travel only occupies a marginal position within it. Brief remarks made in passing by a Yiddish critic in an essay may at times be more enlightening that an entire travelogue that lacks originality or a personal dimension.

[30] Hirschbein 1916: 58.

Other relevant sources include various publications of impersonal nature, including guidebooks, atlases, foreign-language textbooks, news reports, and political cartoons. Even advertisements have the potential to supply relevant information since many deal specifically with travel, as, for instance, the following one from a 1922 issue of a Vilna newspaper.[31] This typical advertisement of a ship company that transported East European passengers, primarily emigrants but also travelers, to "America, Mexico, Canada, Argentina, and Africa" contains many of the key terms that one encounters in the travel literature of the period. The third class is the only fare category mentioned, as most Jews, especially immigrants, could only afford the cheapest option—if that. The availability of the kosher kitchen connotes the prospect of *communal* travel in a specially reserved *Jewish* space. The ambitious *"ale andere lender"* ("all other countries") is not to be taken literally, but rather as including those geographic destinations that mattered to East European Jews at the time; thus, "Africa" can be assumed to stand for South Africa, as this country was the African continent's only destination in serious demand. In Lithuania, where this advertisement was published, this region was of particular importance, as Lithuanian immigrants accounted for the majority of the South African Jewish community—a fact that should be taken into account when examining Jewish travelogues of Africa in general and of South Africa in particular. To varying degrees and in different fashions, all of the above genres and formats participated in Yiddish culture's "project" of translating foreign reality into terms that would be familiar, intelligible, and appealing to the Yiddish-speaking reader.

[31] *Der Emigrant* (Vilna). 26(?) May 1922, Nr.2: 12.

4. On Chapter Division

The structure of this dissertation reflects the changes as well as the continuities of the travelogue genre throughout the twentieth century. At the same time, it accounts for both the significant thematic and stylistic overlaps among works belonging to different chronological periods and the infinite variety of sources outside of travel literature that have the potential to enrich one's understanding of each period's literary and historical context. While the primary sources together depict a lengthy list of specific geographic destinations, the main objective of this dissertation is to explore the personal nature of travelogues alongside their treatment of themes of cultural and spiritual alienation, the individual search for "meaning," and other issues of identity and memory. Given the interrelatedness of these goals, a structure based solely on chronology, geography, or any other single factor would not be fully satisfactory.

The complexity of questions of classification can be illustrated by a comparison of Sh. Almazov's *Iber Amerike* (Across America; 1930) and Falik Lerner's *Tsu gast af a vayl in di fareynikte shtatn* (A Guest for a While in the United States; 1961). Both of these accounts are based on the authors' trips across the United States, yet the considerable differences between the two works accentuate the classificatory secondariness of the specific destination. While the former work displays less interest in Jewish affairs than it does in denouncing what it presents as the hypocrisy and ruthlessness of Western capitalism, the latter views American life through the prism of Jewish communality, general admiration, and occasional expressions of jealousy. Although one could dismiss these differences as reflections of the travelers' unique personalities, a more productive approach involves looking for patterns among a large number of existing travel accounts.

It quickly becomes apparent that such patterns are closely linked to political agendas, namely Almazov's alliance with communism, the Birobidzhan project, and the Soviet propaganda machine on the one hand, and Lerner's interest in strengthening relations between his own community in Argentina and the much more prosperous Jews of the Unites States, on the other. It is also noteworthy that Almazov was visiting from neighboring Canada, where he had settled years earlier, whereas Lerner's perspective was in part shaped by his South American immigrant experience. It would similarly be unwise to ignore the chronology of these two works: the three decades separating *Iber Amerike* and *Tsu gast af a vayl…* saw the annihilation of East European Jewish life by the Nazis, Stalin's assault on Soviet Yiddish culture, and the establishment of the Jewish state.

These two works, just like the other Yiddish travelogues presented in this dissertation, need to be examined in light of their authors' ideological convictions, organizational affiliations, destinations, countries of residence, and historical periods, to say nothing of their family backgrounds, literary experience, and aesthetic preferences. Accordingly, the following chapter division allows to address all of these elements, while prioritizing ones that are particularly vital for tackling the main questions posed by this dissertation. This division combines chronological, geographic, as well as thematic considerations by designating four distinct themes, each linked to a specific set of destinations, and each especially prominent during a particular period. Inevitably, and significantly, there are numerous overlaps.

Chapter 1.

Encounters with the Other and the Self: Adventure and Exoticism

In the early spring of 1931, an issue of *Haynt*—Poland's largest Yiddish newspaper at the time—featured a brief report headlined in a manner clearly designed to pique the reader's curiosity: "*a galitsish shtetl bakumt a yerushe fun a froy, vos hot gelebt af an ekzotisher [sic] indzl*" (a Galician town receives an inheritance from a woman who lived on an exotic island).[32] Key to this title's effectiveness are the titillating term *ekzotish* (exotic); the word *indzl* (island), with its long list of alluring associations and connotations, from Robinson Crusoe to the Count of Monte Cristo; and the subjects of money and death inherent in the notion of *yerushe* (inheritance). Indeed, this short sentence may be considered the epitome of popular Yiddish journalism of the interwar period. The article tells the story of a Jewish woman, who caused a great stir in her native Polish shtetl by bequeathing much of her immense fortune—amassed during her life of adventure in Southeast Asia—to her town's Jewish institutions.

Upon summarizing the basic facts about the woman and her will, journalist B. Tsegrovski shifts his attention to the story's geographic dimension, taking advantage of the opportunity to enlighten his readers about the situation of the British Empire in general and its colony on the Malayan island of Penang in particular. One learns about Penang's military and commercial significance, the staple products of its economy (pepper, rice, coffee, and coconuts), as well as the size and ethnic composition of the island's population. What is especially notable is the nature of the author's justification for offering so much information on such exotic a subject. It is neither idle curiosity nor an indiscriminate thirst for knowledge that this article is meant to

[32] B. Tsegrovski, "A galitsish shtetl bakumt a yerushe fun a froy, vos hot gelebt af an ekzotisher indzl," *Haynt* (March 11, 1931): 4.

satisfy: "*Der gantser inyen volt nisht geven azoy interesant, ven durkh der tsavoe volt men zikh nisht dervust vu in der velt es shlogn alts on yidn, un take undzere galitsishe yidn. Afile af der ekzotisher indzl Penang*."[33] (The whole story would not be so interesting if thanks to this will we had not discovered where in the world Jews can be found, and Galician Jews no less. Even on the exotic island of Penang.) In other words, Jews now have a relationship with this island, a special claim on it. The Jewish presence in the Straits of Malacca has now become "*nokh an interesanter punkt fun yidishn goles in di ekzotishe lender*" (another interesting detail of Jewish diaspora in exotic countries).[34] It may be distant, exotic, and off the beaten track—a mere pinpoint on a vast map—but, crucially, it is now one more place on the ever-expanding terrain of Jewish *goles* (exile); consequently, any information should be deemed as relevant and even potentially *practical*.

The particular nature of Yiddish writings on travel, foreignness, and exoticism was closely linked to the Jewish notion of *goles*, which, depending on the context, could have geographic, political, emotional, religious, or mystical connotations. While the demand for stories about exotic places and adventures was by no means distinctive of Jewish readers, a similar report in a Russian or German newspaper would not have had the same personal and national relevance for its readership. The constant flux in the boundaries of relevant geography, stretching to include places that may once have been unimaginably remote from the everyday reality of Jewish life in Poland, was one of the key features of Yiddish travel literature and, indeed, of Jewish identity.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

Admittedly, for most Polish Jews in the early 1930s, the latest news from Bialystok, Kaunas, or, for that matter, New York or Tel Aviv, had greater significance than information about Indochina, Zanzibar, or Fiji. At the same time, the notion that the geographic map of Jewish life was inherently unstable and potentially all-inclusive had long been deeply ingrained in Yiddish culture and was made even stronger by the increasingly difficult and precarious conditions in Eastern Europe. Being in Lodz one day did not rule out the possibility of finding oneself in Kinshasa or Montevideo only a month later, since after centuries of homelessness and worldwide dispersion meant that, in a certain sense, a Jew could belong anywhere and everywhere.

It is thus easy to see why travel accounts and other sources of information on foreign countries were in such high demand. The average Yiddish reader's vested interest in being knowledgeable about even antipodean locales contributed to a demand for participation in the exploration of every new route, however exotic and unlikely. Yet it was the same notion of *goles* and the corresponding reality of the Jewish diaspora that constituted a challenge to the basic premise of the travelogue genre. The traditional idea of travel presupposed a *home*, from which one departed in order to experience a *different* reality before returning to one's own. An obvious problem with the idea of belonging *everywhere* is that it can easily be interpreted as tantamount to belonging *nowhere*; there is thus no clear *point of departure*.

It is virtually impossible to draw a clear boundary between *travel* and *wandering* in the context of Yiddish literature. Far too often, authors of Yiddish travelogues embarked on their journeys driven by circumstances unrelated to writing, while far too many Jews who dreamed of leaving Europe were never able to do so. In an article published less than a year before the Nazi invasion of Poland, the well-known Warsaw Yiddish journalist A. S. Lirik summed up the

situation of East European Jews in the image of an aspiring Jewish traveler "*vos shteyt bam globus un gefint in der gantser velt keyn plats nisht far zikh*" (who stands in front of a world globe and finds no place for himself).[35]

This striking image of global homelessness has implications beyond the practical challenges of travel and emigration. For many Jews, in particular those of the younger generation, the confusion was not only geographic but also cultural, linguistic, and spiritual. The rise of modern Yiddish travel literature in the early twentieth century took place against the backdrop of East European Jewry's rapid modernization, secularization, and politicization, as well as the rapid development of Yiddish book publishing and the Yiddish press. The new times brought fresh challenges, opportunities, and aspirations. The desire for education—which was often realized in the form of self-learning—and the urge to connect with the outside world became dominant forces in Jewish society and major factors in the widening generational gap between young Jews and their parents and grandparents, who often clung to insular life in traditional Jewish communities. For the young "rebels," this estrangement could serve as a source of inspiration, but it was also prone to provoke doubt, nostalgia, and even despair. All of these different aspects of twentieth-century Yiddish travel literature contribute to its importance both for the study of the travelogue genre and of the history of modern Jewish identity.

The popularity of Yiddish travel literature was in part a manifestation of a much broader phenomenon. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the entire Western world was preoccupied with travel and exploration often in search of the exotic, quests that were all the more relevant in light of Europe's continuing colonial expansion. As Edward Said and other postcolonial critics have compellingly demonstrated, the West's fascination with the exotic

[35] A. S. Lirik, "Der vander-yid bam globus," *Haynt* (December 18, 1938): 6.

stemmed from a desire for political and cultural domination that existed alongside growing uncertainty regarding its own superiority and legitimacy. Rapid technological progress, the increasingly impersonal nature of modern industrial production, growing political instability, and the overall weakening of the traditional cultural and spiritual foundations were related factors that sparked the interest of many alienated Europeans in the countries and cultures of the East. It was this social climate that contributed to the rise of "decadent" art and literature, which offered an alternative to the mechanized grayness of modern life by celebrating exoticism, sensuality, and self-indulgent pessimism.

There is no question that Western discourse on colonialism and exoticism had a major effect on Yiddish travel literature. And yet, the ambiguous position of the Jew within Orientalist discourse greatly complicated Yiddish authors' treatment of these subjects. Geographically, Yiddish culture was situated squarely within Europe and the West. Yet to what extent did European Jews—and, specifically, *East European* Jews—think of themselves as true "Europeans"? And to what extent were they accepted as such by the surrounding Christian culture? The prominent Yiddish intellectual A. Almi addressed the phenomenon of the Orientalist "craze" in an essay written at the height of the Yiddish travelogue's popularity:

> *Keyn mol iz nokh der bikhermark nisht geven azoy farleygt mit bikher vegn oryent, vi atsind. Bikher vegn der filosofye, literatur, un minhogim fun di oryentalishe felker; un nokh mer—on a shir mer—vegn zeyer dervakhn, vegn zeyer eyropeizirn zikh, vegn zeyer bavofnen zikh . . . dem epes, far velkhn Eyrope un Amerike shrekn zikh*.[36]
>
> Never before has the book market been so full of books about the Orient as it is now. Books on the philosophy, literature, and custom`s of the Oriental nations, and, furthermore—infinitely more—on their awakening, on their Europeanizing on their arming themselves . . . on that "something" that Europe and America fear.

According to Almi, the relationship between "*di tsvey kulturn—di oryentalishe un di oktsidentalishe*" (the two cultures—the Oriental and the Occidental) is primarily governed by fear: both Europe's fear of the other and the cultural and political meekness of colonized nations and metropolitan minorities.[37] While Almi does not initially address the Jewish case directly, he

[36] Almi, *Literarishe nesies*, 367.

[37] Ibid., 357.

makes it clear that the issues of colonial domination, cultural authenticity, and national pride are immediately relevant to his fellow Jews. Discussing the situation of British India, he jokingly suggests that had the typesetter accidentally omitted the letter *nun*, and inadvertently produced the word *idishe* (Jewish) instead of *indishe* (Indian), the essay's arguments would have remained equally valid .[38]

Yiddish travel writers engaged with the subject of colonialism on many different levels. In Africa, although a continent almost entirely divided and claimed by Britain, France, Italy, Belgium, and Portugal, a Yiddish writer was outside the context of European antisemitism and was received merely as a representative of the white race. There was, therefore, a distinctly liberating aspect to such journeys, much as many European women found freedom, in similar destinations, from Europe's rigid conventions of gender. By bringing these travelers into contact with an other that was vastly more exotic, leaving Europe made Yiddish writers more European than they were in Poland, Latvia, or Rumania. Thus, some of Yiddish literature's most passionate declarations of affection for Europe are found in travelogues. "*Shtendik, ven a shif rayst mikh op fun eyropeishn breg un trogt mikh avek . . . tsu vayte, oft mol umbakante portn un lender*" (Every time a ship takes me off from Europe's shores and brings me away . . . to faraway, often unknown ports and countries), confesses Khaim Shoshkes, "*bahersht mikh a gefil fun momentaln umet, a min nervez-fiber*" (I get possessed by a feeling of momentary sadness, a kind of nervous fever).[39] He describes taking leave of Europe as "*vi oft mol a libnder man fun trayer froy, kedey shpeter nokh mit mer libe un tsertlekhkeyt tsuriktsukumen tsu ir*" (like sometimes the loving

[38] Ibid., 352.

[39] Khaim Shoshkes, *Lender un shtet: rayze-ayndrukn* (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1930), 172.

husband of a devout wife [does] in order to later to return with even more love and tenderness).[40] Throughout his interwar travel writings, Shoshkes positions himself as a proud *pan-eyropeer* (Pan-European) and an unapologetic Eurocentrist, who professes love for the "*noblste tsvishn di finf shvester-veltteyln*" (the noblest among the five sister continents).[41] Moreover, he presumes his readers likewise to be self-identified Europeans. While describing the city of Algiers as a modern metropolis, he offers the following reassurance: "*Nor a bisl geduld, antoyshte eyropeer, vos lekhtsn nokh ekzotishe ayndrukn! S'iz nokh tsu fri zikh meyaesh tsu zayn.*"[42] (Just a little patience, disappointed Europeans craving exotic impressions! It's too early to despair.) It is telling, however, that this Eurocentrism is devoid of nationalism. It is easier for a Jewish writer to pledge allegiance to the amorphous notion of "*altitshke, eygene Eyrope*" (my dear old Europe) than to a specific native country (Poland, in Shoshkes's case), as one's appreciation of Europe can then prevail over one's specific grievances against a particular European country's official policies or popular sentiment. Indeed, expanding one's identity and claiming inclusivity was a solution common to many Jewish intellectuals struggling to negotiate among several conflicting loyalties and contradictory impulses.

An important factor in Yiddish writers' treatment of non-European "natives" and this subject's empowering potential to affirm East European Jews' rightful place among the "civilized nations" was the existence of a long-established internal Jewish discourse of rationality vs. irrationality, education vs. ignorance, civilization vs. backwardness and fanaticism. On the one hand, Yiddish literature exhibited a strong tendency of favoring

[40] Ibid., 171–172.

[41] Ibid., 172.

[42] Ibid., 128.

rationalism, which was in part a heritage of the Haskalah with its emphasis on education, progress, and propriety. One specific target of traditional maskilic discourse was Hasidism, which maskilim attacked as a nest of irrationality, benightedness, and superstition. On the other hand, "post-maskilic" Yiddish writers, led by Y. L. Peretz, took a very different, and much more positive, approach to Hasidic folklore and beliefs, championing this cultural heritage as the expression of the Jewish people's creative genius and a source of inspiration for constructing a modern European secular Jewish identity. Both discourses informed the terminology and ways of thinking found in Yiddish travelogues dealing with non-European populations.

The interplay of these dialogues is evident in a travel account by the Yiddish journalist Uri Gliklikh. As may be anticipated from its title—which refers to the African continent as "*dos land fun moyre, zabobones, fintsterkeyt un fanatizm*" (the country of fear, superstitions, darkness and fanaticism)—his description of Northern Africa could hardly be more negative.[43] However far removed from Europe geographically, the supercilious self-assurance and gross generalizations pervading the article rely on vocabulary typical of anti-Hasidic discourse:

> *Laykhtzinikeyt un naivitet kharakterizirn di merheyt fun di araber un berbern, velkhe bavoynen tsofn-Afrike. Di same umgleyblekhste bove-mayses, di same vildste zabobones shpayzn zeyer fantazye. Vos umgleyblekher un vilder—alts mer treft es tsu zeyer farshtand*."[44]
>
> The majority of the Arabs and Berbers that populate North Africa are characterized by simplemindedness and naiveté. The most unbelievable old wives' tales, the wildest superstitions feed their imagination. The more unbelievable and outlandish—the more it fits their understanding.

There are clear parallels to one of the most famous and representative Yiddish works of the early Haskalah—the 1796 satirical play *Laykhtzin und fremelay* (Frivolity and Hypocrisy) by the

[43] Uri Gliklikh, "Afrike - dos land fun moyre, zabobones, fintsterkeyt un fanatizm: fun mayn rayze iber tsofn-Afrike," *Haynt* (March 15, 1932): 4.

[44] Ibid.

German Jewish maskil Aharon Halle-Wolfssohn (1754–1835). Not only does Gliklikh describe the North Africans as *laykhtzinikeyt*, using the modern form of the word in the play's title, he also launches an intellectual attack that echoes Halle-Wolfssohn. depicting powerful Moroccan marabouts, or "holy men," and ordinary Arabs and Berbers of that region in a manner nearly identical to the maskilic criticisms of Hasidic rebbes and their gullible followers.

Gliklikh reports a story that he heard from a commercial agent of a French wool firm. The agent regularly purchased large amounts of wool in a certain Berber village, until one day he is accused by a local traditional healer of giving "*a shlekht oyg*" (an evil eye) to a critically ill boy in the village. Finding himself unable to reason with the healer, the agent visits the local "*heylikn*" (holy) marabout, only to be angered so deeply that he responds to the marabout's "*in tsha allah*" with a local curse involving jinni. Naturally, the mention of jinn marks the end of any hope of restoring his relationship with the community: the villagers are now convinced that the Frenchman is a *mekhashef* (sorcerer) and resort to *tfiles* (prayers) and *ongeshribene mit a koyl magishe tseykhns* (magical signs written with coal) to protect themselves against *beyze gayster* (evil spirits). The Jewish connotations are unmistakable, and Gliklikh's use of such terms as *bove-mayses* (tall tales)—an old Yiddish expression originating from the title of Elye Bokher's *Bovo-bukh* (1507–1508)—and the Polish-derived *zabobones* (superstitions) further accentuates the author's East European Jewish perspective. And yet the article refrains from directly mentioning the Jewish case. By the 1930s the maskilic-Hasidic debate was no longer as prominent in Yiddish cultural discourse as it had been only a half-century earlier. On the contrary, an appreciation of authentic Jewish customs and beliefs had come to the fore, while disagreements between Hasidic leaders and secularists had shifted from the validity of traditional amulets and incantations into the realm of politics and national agendas. Applied to Jews, the

dismissive tone of Gliklikh's article would have been fully typical of the eighteenth or nineteenth century, but it was out of place in 1932.

The notion of the natives' fear is an integral part of the cultural superiority evident in Gliklikh's article. He gives little attention, however, to the West's own feelings of vulnerability. Will the colonized "barbarians" one day rise against their colonizers and take revenge on Western civilization? Will white Europeans end their days in the cooking pots of illiterate cannibals? Perhaps even more so than the natives' cultural backwardness, the subject of Europe's own fears affirmed Yiddish travelers' identification with the West. Noyekh Mishkovski's travelogue of the Horn of Africa contains a passage that powerfully expresses this racial isolation and fear: "*Un vos vayter ikh gey, alts mer umheymlekh vert mir. Gehert a mayse? . . . Do bin ikh eyner aleyn, a vayser, blondzhe um iber der shtot fun di shvartse. Keynem zet men nit. Un vos tu ikh, az me falt on af mir?*"[45] (The longer I walk, the more uncomfortable I begin to feel. . . . Here I am, all alone, a white man, roaming the city of the blacks. The streets look deserted. But what am I going to do, if I suddenly get attacked?) While the Yiddish literary context imposes distinctly Jewish connotations—including the theme of a lone Jew's vulnerability in a Gentile environment—it is Mishkovski's Europeanness that in this situation overshadows the specifically Jewish side of his identity. Yiddish literature and folklore abound in stories about Jews, even prominent rabbis, beaten, humiliated, intimidated by peasants, and chased by dogs. Yet—and therein lies one of the liberating aspects of the Yiddish writer's non-Western travel—the Jewish-Gentile divide and enmity are of little consequence on the streets of the Eritrean city of Massawa. Both the native population and the Jewish traveler alike are in that moment perceived solely in terms of skin color.

[45] Noyekh Mishkovski, *Etyopye: yidn in Afrike un Azye* (Chicago: M. Ceshinsky, 1936), 8.

The fear of being the only white person in a black crowd figures in Mishkovski's book as an immediate *racial* instinct needing no justification. It is precisely its immediacy that lends such a forceful claim of racial and, by association, also cultural belonging. The author belies a similar instinctive reaction in describing his shock at the sight of a meal consumed by Ethiopian soldiers, consisting of raw meat:

> *Af der tsveyter nakht fun undzer shteyn in mitn veg hob ikh gezen nokh ergers, tsu vos mir, eyropeyer, kenen zikh nit tsugevoynen: a fertsik soldatn hobn geshokhtn an oks un nit-dervartndik zikh, az di fel zol in gantsn opgeshundn vern, hobn di soldatn geshnitn fun oks shtiker fleysh un glaykh gegesn.*[46]
> On the second night of our break during the journey I saw something even worse, to which we Europeans cannot become accustomed: around forty soldiers slaughtered an ox and without waiting for it to be fully skinned, the soldiers cut pieces of meat from the ox and immediately ate them.

While the writer is deeply appalled by the eating of an animal's raw flesh, it is not as a Jew that he takes objection. Mishkovski never explicitly refers to Jewish prohibitions, although the soldiers' treatment of the ox goes against the most fundamental laws of kashrut—the prohibition against eating *eyver-min-hakhay* (meat off a living body). The kosher laws are no longer of relevance to him, a fully secular modern European of the mid-1930s. It is rather as member of civilized Europe that Mishkovski expresses disgust, and the legitimacy of his status is underscored by his switch to the first person plural: "*mir, eyropeyer*" (we, Europeans). When it comes to the consumption of raw flesh in Africa, it is "we," rather than "I"; "Europeans," rather than "Jews."

Establishing clear racial and civilizational boundaries was not always so simple. European Jewish travelers' experience of other parts of the world was greatly complicated by the existence of native Jewish communities in such places as Iraq, India, and Ethiopia. Postcolonial

[46] Ibid., 19.

critics' assertion that Europe's attraction to the exotic was largely linked to its desire to define itself in opposition to the supposedly inferior *other* could be suitably applied to Mishkovski's account of Africa and to many other Yiddish travelogues. Moreover, given that European culture viewed Jews, too, as the other, the opportunity to experience oneself as being unquestionably European was deeply appealing to many Jewish travelers—whether consciously or subconsciously. Yet when it came to describing Oriental Jews, whose physical appearance, dress, language, food, and customs were so strikingly different from the Ashkenazic world—the Yiddish travel writer was on thin ice. Was a Jew from Warsaw to think of them as "the other"? Or did the Jewish religious and ethnic solidarity trump the civilizational divide between the West and "the rest"?

Writers had varying responses to such challenge to their identity. While some celebrated the worldwide Jewish presence and turned it into a powerful literary or political theme—often with strong romantic connotations—others took steps to distance themselves from their "Oriental" or African co-religionists. As an example of the latter response, Mishkovski's description of Ethiopian Jews, like Gliklikh's scathing analysis of Northern Africa's culture, is disdainful in both tone and conclusions: "*Di shvartse yidn, vi ale nisht zeyer antviklte shvotim un felker, gloybn . . . in ale narishkeytn—in sheydim, rukhes, shlekhte un gute gayster, zey zaynen hekhst obergloybish*" (The Black Jews, like all underdeveloped tribes and nations, believe in all kinds of silliness—in demons, spirits, evil and good spirits—and are extremely superstitious).[47] Mishkovski evinces little respect for the exotic Jewish population; and his use of epithets as *nisht zeyer antviklt* (not very developed) and *narish* (silly) connote little Jewish solidarity.

[47] Ibid., 88.

The same book contains, however, several passages that exhibit the author's awareness that the subjects cannot be considered complete strangers but people who, however different from him, identify as Jewish. This is apparent in striking, occasional departures from his otherwise neutral tone of a European ethnographer; Mishkovski employs East European Jewish imagery and vocabulary to refer to African and Yemeni Jews—as if experimenting with their fitness for these subjects. He assures the reader that he occasionally detected something in Ethiopian Jews' faces that reminded him of "*yeshive-bokherim fun Volozhin oder fun Mir*" (yeshiva students from Volozhin or Mir).[48] Likewise, in his chapter on Yemenites, although he reports finding them "*afn ershtn kuk . . . reynblutike araber*" (at first glance . . . pure-blooded Arabs), his opinion gradually changes, as if, through a fog, he discerned the locals' Jewish nature:

> *Nor ven mir hobn zikh gut ayngekukt in zey, hobn mir take derkent in zey yidn. Ershtns—di lange gekreyzlte peyes bizn haldz, un tsveytns—di oygn. Ikh hob shoyn gezen af mayn lebn oygn, yidishe oygn, nor azelkhe oygn hob ikh nokh gezen. Shvartse, umetike, tsu der zelber tsayt lebedike, kluge oygn. In zeyere oygn shpiglt zikh op zeyer toyzntyorik vist umbaholfn goles-lebn, zeyere ale tsores un leydn*.[49]
>
> But upon studying them more closely, we realized that they were indeed Jews. First, the long curly sidelocks reaching down to the neck, and second, the eyes. I had seen many eyes in my life, Jewish eyes, yet I had never seen eyes like these. Black, melancholy, and at the same time lively and intelligent eyes. Their eyes reflect a thousand years of wretched and helpless life in exile, all of their misfortunes and suffering.

This emotional description of the Yemenites' eyes has connotations that clearly go beyond this particular Jewish community and relate to universal Jewish motifs, such as is found in the famous lines of Mark Varshavski's song "Alef-beys": "*vifl in di oysyes lign trern un vi fil*

[48] Ibid., 24.

[49] Ibid., 102.

geveyn; az ir vet, kinder, dem goles shlepn . . . ."[50] Yet, significantly, even in this passage Mishkovski still employs the pronoun *zeyer* (their) rather than *undzer* (our) thus rejecting the position of someone sharing the legacy of a hard life in *goles.*

There was yet another wall separating Mishkovski and other Yiddish-speaking travelers from Yemenite Jews: language. The fact that the latter spoke no Yiddish meant they were excluded from much of Jewish cultural life, since at the time the language was still spoken by the majority of the world's Jewish population. Indeed, Yiddish was thought of as competing with English for the honor of being the world's most widely spoken language. Of course, the reasons for the two languages' domination were profoundly different: "*durkh der britisher imperye*" (because of the British Empire) in the case of latter and "*durkh der fanandergevorfnkeyt undzerer iber ale yamen*" (because of our dispersal across all seas) in that of the former, as Almi wrote in the early 1930s.[51] Implicit in Almi's formulation is the simple notion that English represents political power, while Yiddish reflects the uprootedness of a particularly vulnerable nation, which has been the Jews' plight since ancient times, as emphasized by the use of the traditional expression *iber ale yamen* (across all seas).

Paradoxically, by virtue of its global nature, Yiddish also functioned as a substitute for a non-existent Jewish empire, providing East European Jewish travelers with a far-reaching network. As Shoshkes notes, "*Es iz take an emes. Mir, di yidn, zaynen tsezeyt un tseshpreyt iber der gantser velt. In mayn rayze arum der velt hob ikh keyn eyntsik land nit getrofn, vu es zoln nit zayn yidn.*"[52] (It really is true. We, the Jews, are scattered and dispersed throughout the entire

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[51] Almi, *Literarishe nesies*, 166.

[52] Mishkovski, *Etyopye: yidn in Afrike un Azye*, 53.

world. During my trip around the world I never encountered a single country without Jews.) Encountering Jewish immigrants from Poland and other places in Eastern Europe was a constant theme in writings by Shoshkes and countless other Jewish travelers, for whom *Yiddish* was practically synonymous with *Jewish*, two notions that are, incidentally, expressed by the same word in the Yiddish language. Upon encountering a group of local Jews in Morocco, Shoshkes and his companions discover they have no language in common, as their Northern African co-religionists speak only *shpanyolish* (i.e., Judezmo, or Ladino) and Arabic.[53] Mishkovski describes a similar episode, involving Yemenites, and stresses the latter's isolation from the thriving world of Yiddish literature and culture: "*[F]arshteyt zikh, az undzer yidishe shprakh mit ir . . . raykher literatur iz zey in gantsn umbakant. Zey hobn gekukt af undzere tsaytungen, zhurnaln, bikher in yidish un hobn zikh gevundert: shrift mit di heylike oysyes, un zey kenen zey dokh nit leyenen*" (Of course, our Yiddish language with its . . . rich literature is fully unfamiliar to them. They were looking at our Yiddish newspapers, journals, books, and felt surprise: the writing was with the holy letters, and yet they were not able to read it).[54] It is through such encounters with non-Ashkenazic Jews that the *Yiddish* component of East European Jewish travel writers comes to the fore most powerfully. It is no longer their general Europeanness, education, or skin color that functions as the core of their identity, but rather their language and its cultural riches. Unlike in their contact with the non-Jewish world, their association with Yiddish is here *uncomplicated* and even empowering. As the exclusive possession of Ashkenazic civilization and the world's dominant Jewish language, Yiddish becomes the

[53] Shoshkes, *Lender un shtet: rayze-ayndrukn*, 140.

[54] Mishkovski, *Etyopye: yidn in Afrike un Azye*, 109.

determinant in the Jewish cultural hierarchy, which was analogous to Christian Europe's dichotomy of the civilized vs. the "primitives."

Perhaps more problematic—although often with more positive connotations—was the religious divide between the Yiddish traveler and the Oriental Jew. There is only one circumstance that provokes in Mishkovski slight feelings of guilt, namely his Yemenite hosts' disappointment at the non-Jewish behavior of the *vayse yidn* (white Jews):

> *Khotsh mir hobn zikh oysgemit, az zey zoln dos alts nit zen, nit bamerkn, dokh hobn mir undzer "goyishkeyt" fun zey nit gekent in gantsn bahaltn. Un zey hot es shtark fardrosn, shtark gekrenkt. Un nokh mer: un ot azelkhe "shlekhte" yidn forn dos in dos heylike land, in dos land fun Avrom, Yitskhok, Yankev un Moyshe-rabeynu? Zey iz dos geven umfarshtendlekh. Un mir fardrist biz hayntikn tog, vos mir hobn mit undzer nit-religyezer oyffirung zey azoy fil agmes-nefesh farshaft*.[55]
>
> Despite our efforts, we were not able to completely conceal from them our "Gentile" ways. And it offended and upset them greatly. Especially given that such "bad" Jews were on their way to the Holy Land, to the Land of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. They could not comprehend it. And to this day, I regret that we caused them so much distress with our non-religious behavior.

Mishkovski repeatedly demonstrates his command of Jewish religious vocabulary and an ability to look at himself and his secular companions from a traditionalist's point of view. Yet nowhere in the text does he hint at having any regrets about his estrangement from religious observance or any genuine compunction about "*roykhern un arbetn um shabes*" (smoking and working on the Sabbath). Mishkovski represents a generation of young Jews who largely rejected the religious lifestyle of their parents, and his concern here is solely for his hosts' feelings. The most recognition he offers for the non-European Jews' superior authenticity as *Jews* is in his references to Ethiopian Jews' Hasidic-like simplicity. In its use of Hasidic imagery for describing "primitive beliefs," his portrayal of Beta Israel's folklore is reminiscent of Gliklikh's

[55] Ibid., 116.

treatment of the Moroccan Jewish community, except here the Hasidic parallels are made explicit and lend themselves to a positive interpretation:

> אזוי ווי אַלע אַריענטאַלישע פעלקער — באַזיצן אויך די פַּא־
> לאַשן א רייכן פאַלקלאָר. זיי האָבן ליב צו דערציילן מעשות, לע־
> גענדעס, מעשות אָן א סוף. צווישן די לעגענדעס, מעשות זיינען
> דאָ א סך, וואָס זיינען ענלעך צו די מעשות פון טויזנט און איין נאַכט.
> אלץ מיט נסים, מיט וואונדער איבער וואונדער. אין אלץ האָט
> געשטעקט גאָטס האַנט, גאָטס ווילן, גאָטס חכמה און זיין אומבא־
> גרייפלעכער געדאַנק. זיי דערציילן די לעגענדעס מיט אזא הייליקן
> געפיל, מיט אזא באַגייסטערונג, ווי די חסידים דערציילן נסים פון
> זייערע רבי׳אים, און זיי דערציילן דאָס פשוט, גלויבן אין דעם.[56]

> Just like all Oriental peoples—the Falasha also possess rich folklore. They like telling stories, legends, tales without an end. Among the legends, stories, there are many that are similar to the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Everything with miracles and great wonders. In everything, there can be seen God's hand, God's will, God's wisdom, and his unfathomable thought. They tell the legends with such a sense feeling of holiness, with such enthusiasm, like the Hasidim tell of the wonder of their rebbes, and they tell it simply, believe in it.

By evoking Hasidism and thus incorporating the Morrocan Jews into the East European Jewish system of cultural references, Mishkovski makes his text more effective for his implied Yiddish-speaking Jewish reader—not that the mere use of common Jewish associations would make his book sufficiently appealing to a wide audience. There are expectations associated with travel literature: the reader wants to be entertained, and, especially in texts about "exotic" places, desires the evocation of fantasy. Mishkovski is satisfying these demands as well, when he makes a mention of *One Thousand and One Nights*—the epitome of mystery, sensuality, and adventure, among many other orientalist tropes. A directly related theme is the European notion of the "primitive" people's touching emotional and spiritual simplicity, of which members of the civilized nations are supposedly no longer capable due to the skepticism resulting from the West's excessive intellectual and technological sophistication.

[56] Ibid., 56.

While recognizing the exotic African Jews' charming simplicity, Mishkovski draws no conclusions about the condition of his own community. The first step in doing so would have been accepting and celebrating the idea that the essence of Jewishness transcended the boundaries of the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazic civilization. As illustrated by the following passage from the perfectly secular author Shoshkes's travelogue of Morocco, religiosity was not a precondition for taking this step: "*Di toyre, zet, iz di eygene. Di bukhshtabn, di shprakh, der inhalt—di zelbe in Vilne, San-Frantsisko un Maroko*." (The Torah, you see, is the same. The letters, the language, the content—it is the same in Vilna, San Francisco, and Morocco.)[57] Later in the same text, Shoshkes mentions being moved upon the discovery, among his Moroccan Jewish hosts' collection of holy books, copies of *vilner shasn* (the Vilna edition of the Talmud) from the Romm publishing house.[58] The discovery of such a powerful symbol of Jewish Eastern Europe helped Shoshkes realize with greater clarity how much he had in common with these exotic-looking people. Once he is able to identify with them, it was inevitable that comparison, to their qualities that implied superiority of one sort or another, was to follow. If nothing else, it was Oriental Jews' firm rootedness in their places of settlement that appealed to their East European brethren, who were all too conscious of being scattered *iber ale yamen*. A sense of admiration is explicit in Shoshkes's article about the Jews of Iraq, in which he focuses on the Baghdad Jewish community's geographical continuity: "*in altn Bovl voynt an alter, gezunter un tif farvortslter yidnshtam, velkher barimt zikh mit a metrike fun iber dray toyznt yor*" (in old Babylon lives an ancient, healthy, and deeply rooted Jewish community, which prides itself on

[57] Shoshkes, *Lender un shtet: rayze-ayndrukn*, 140.

[58] Ibid.

its three-thousand-year history)."[59] The tone of this article, published on the eve of World War II amid extreme political uncertainty and a pervading sense of doom belies slight jealousy. Moreover, although it does not concern itself with religion, there is an implicit recognition of the close correlation among the geographical, political, cultural, and religious "health" of a community.

The subject of Oriental Jews' superior position as the guardians of unadulterated Judaism was often directly addressed in the works of Yiddish travel writers who were specifically interested in religion and were themselves religious. It was the very "backwardness" that prompted the noted Orthodox and Zionist writer Gedalye Bublik—who was appalled by the rapid decline of religion and the increasingly popular notion that "*di toyre fun Harvard iz hekher vi di toyre fun Volozhin*" (the Torah of Harvard is superior to the Torah of Volozhin)—to celebrate, lionize, and, to an extent, romanticize the Bukharan Jews' "Oriental" traditionalism:[60]

קורץ: די בוכארער אידן זיינען פֿטור פון דייטשען מאטעריאליזם, פון רוסישען ניהיליזם און פראנצויזישען הפקר'יזם, וועלכע האָבען אָבער אזוי שטאַרק געווירקט אויף די מזרח־אירא־פֿעאישע אידן. די בוכארער אידן זיינען אידען, ווילען ניט צופֿאסען זייער־ער נעראַנקען און נעפֿיהלען צו ריעזע אָרער יענע נוי'שע מחברים, פונקט ווי זיי ווילען ניט צופֿאסען רעם תנ"ך צו

די דייטשע ביבעל־קריטיקער, ווי מען טהוט אין רער העברעאישער גימנאזיע. זיי זוכען ניט פאר זייער ציוניזם קיין הסכמה פון ראסען־טעאָרעטיקער, סאָ־ציאַלע ררשנים און ווי־סענשאפֿטס־פאָרשונגען פון אנדערע נאציאָנאַלן, פֿונקט ווי א געזונדער מענש געהט ניט זוכען קיינע בעווייזע אז ער לעבט אַרער אז ער מעג לעבען.[61]

> In short: the Bukharan Jews got rid of German materialism, Russian nihilism, and French *hefkerizm* [made-up word; from *hefker* "abandoned, stray, lawless"], which had such a strong impact on the East European Jew. The Bukharan Jews are Jews, and they have no desire to adapt their thoughts and feelings to those of Gentile authors, just like they do not want to adapt the Tanakh to German Bible critics, the way it is now done in Hebrew *gymnasia*. They require no approval for

[59] Khaim Shoshkes, "Di ekzotishe yidn fun Bagdad," *Haynt* (May 27, 1938): 5 (emphasis original).

[60] Gedalye Bublik, *Min hameytser: a shtudyum iber dos lebn fun der idisher natsyon un a blik in der tsukunft fun yidn un yidntum* (New York: [n.p.], 1923), 27.

[61] Gedalye Bublik, *Mayn rayze in Erets-Yisroel* (New York: Tageblat, 1921), 300.

> their Zionism from racial theorists, social preachers, or scientific studies of other nations, just like a healthy person needs no evidence of his being alive or possessing the right to live.

Bublik's diatribe against modern culture—including the Haskalah, socialism, science, and even secular Zionism—conveys a strong sense of nostalgia for the premodern ways of thinking and living that he felt were disappearing among East European Jews. As a prominent Zionist intellectual, Bublik did not, as one might wrongly conclude from the above passage, object to strengthening the Zionist message with scientific evidence. By Bublik's reasoning, the fact that Bukharan Jews require no credence from science entails their superiority to European Jews, who lack such self-sufficiency and require various "crutches" and "medicines." Bublik's statements were consistent with prevailing Zionist discourse, according to which the degenerate mentality of the timid ghetto Jew needed healing through association with the historical Jewish homeland. The imagery of health and disease was characteristic of interwar cultural discourse, including eugenics and various forms of racially based scientific theories, which, ironically, Bublik clearly rejects. It quickly becomes clear that Bublik's primary focus is not the Bukharan Jews as his fellow Yiddish speakers—especially in America, where Bublik had been living since 1904.

Bublik's notion of the Jewish people's spiritual crisis had parallels in wider discourse on the bleak prospects of Western civilization. It is worth remembering that Bublik's travelogue of Palestine appeared less than three years after the publication of the first volume of Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West; 1918, 1922), which posited the imminent end of the Western world. Feelings of discontent were prevalent in the social, political, and cultural realms, both among Jews and non-Jews. Writing about colonialism provided Yiddish writers with an opportunity to express their moral convictions—often in the

form of indignation—and to indirectly challenge Europe's treatment of themselves and their fellow East European Jews.

Yiddish journalist A. S. Lirik represents another position assumed by East European Jews in writing about Africa. In an article about Fascist Italy's 1935 military aggression against Ethiopia, two striking photographs accompany the text. The first shows the "Negus of Abyssinia" speaking on the radio, while the other shows porters in Addis Ababa carrying the furniture and other belongings of fleeing Europeans. The irony here is plain: Ethiopians are being forced to pay a disproportionately high price for Europe's technological "gift." "*Azoy kleyn iz gevorn di velt un azoy noent zenen mentshn tsvishn zikh gevorn, az men zitst in Varshe un men hert a rede fun Adis-Abeba. Eyrope hot rekht tsu zayn shtolts af ir kultur.*" (The world has become so small, and people so close to one another that one can sit in Warsaw while listening to a speech from Addis Ababa. Europe has the right to be proud of its culture.) Moreover, European warplanes are launching attack on the same Ethiopians, who can be seen bent under the heavy load of the "*hob un guts*" belonging to the Europeans fleeing for the safety of their native countries. Far from praising Europe's technological advances, Lirik draws attention to the Ethiopians' impending defeat and subjugation and asserts the unjustifiability of Europe's actions. Unlike Shoshkes, Lirik does not present himself as a proud European. Rather, in his position as a Yiddish journalist, he positions himself as a member of a paradoxical third party: that of Europe's *non-Europeans*, or the Christian world's *non-Christians*.

The emotional centerpiece of Lirik's article is Emperor Haile Selassie's attempt to establish a dialogue with the Italian aggressors by speaking to them "*vi a krist tsu kristn*" (as a Christian to Christians). The idea of challenging Europe on its own terms is a common theme in Yiddish literature, and one Lirik uses to great effect in his defense of the ancient African nation.

He describes the Negus's mention of *di aseres-hadibres* (the Ten Commandments) and his appeal to the common humanity of pain: "*ven men fargist dos blut fun di shvartse tut zey genoy azoy vey vi di vayse*" (when one sheds the blood of the blacks, it hurts them just as it hurts the whites).[62] Lirik's use of the Hebrew term for the Ten Commandments accentuates the common Judeo-Christian moral legacy and serves to strengthen his position as a Jewish thinker joining an African in condemning Europe's moral decline. After all, while it was from Europeans that the Negus received the radio, it was from the Jews that both Ethiopia and the nations of Europe received the Bible.

Yiddish writers' attraction to travel was attributable, in part, to the opportunity it presented to face and engage with the world's rich cultural and political diversity, sometimes within the space of a single hour. The experience of encountering other travelers was often more important than the destination. While on the road, one could enjoy relative neutrality, which allowed one to feel like an equal among people of different nations, faiths, and political ideologies. Encounters in trains, coaches, and other modes of travel appear regularly in Yiddish fiction, but in no genre is this subject treated as frequently as in travelogues. A characteristic description of a train appears in I. J. Singer's travelogue of the Soviet Union: "*In tsug, vos fort Berlin-Moskve durkh Varshe, iz varem, ongenem. Der restoran-vagon iz ful bazetst. Farshidene shrpakhn hert men do, frantseyzish, daytsh, english, rusish, khinezish un teylvayz oykh poylish*."[63] (Inside the train going from Berlin to Moscow via Warsaw is warm and pleasant. The restaurant car is full. Different languages can be heard here: French, German, English, Russian, Chinese, and sometimes also Polish.) The reader is instantly made aware of the potential for an

[62] A. S. Lirik, "Fun Varshe biz Adis-Abeba," *Haynt* (October 17, 1935): 3.

[63] Israel Joshua Singer, *Nay Rusland* (Warsaw: Kh. Bzhoza, 1939), 7.

unexpected and enlightening encounter. All of the passengers are potential interlocutors. People who would have never spoken in other circumstance may strike a conversation while in the same train compartment. The diverse group of individuals is temporarily sharing the same space, which becomes a microcosm of the entire humanity. "*Ikh tsveyfl tsi m'ken ergets in der velt ontrefn aza farsheydnartikeyt fun felker, rasn un interesn*" (I doubt that one can find such diversity of peoples, races, and interest anywhere else in the world), writes Miskhovski of his train journey in Africa.[64]

In travel, there emerges the possibility for peaceful coexistence between the disparate peoples of the world. Shoshkes conveys this idea in a description of one of his sea journeys: it is a temporary truce, during which "*englender un italyener, frantsoyzn un daytshn, fashistn un demokratn*" (Englishmen and Italians, Frenchmen and Germans, Fascists and Democrats) can find intellectual exchange as easy and enjoyable as the communal taking of meals.[65] Yet it is precisely on a ship, in this liminal state away from dry land, that deep meditations about identity often take place, partially spurred by the inescapable presence of the other passengers. In a passage describing his sea journey to Palestine, Bublik creates a masterful opposition of the colonizer and the colonized, in which he—the Jewish traveler—finds himself in the middle. Not yet sleepy, he is standing on the deck, observing on one side "*englishe rayznder vos forn keyn Mitsrayim un Indyen, ver af a lustrayze un ver far biznes-tsvekn*" (the English travelers who travel to Egypt and India, some for vacation and others for business) and on the other, "*indishe badinte fun shif vos geyen borves un zaynen shtendik shtil un fartrakht, rikhtik vi zey voltn aher aropgefaln fun an ander velt*" (the ship's Indian employees, who go barefoot and are always

[64] Mishkovski, *Etyopye: yidn in Afrike un Azye*, 15.

[65] Shoshkes, *Lender un shtet: rayze-ayndrukn*, 172.

quiet and pensive, as if they had landed here from a different world).[66] The linking of colonialism with Jewish exclusivity and loneliness is not coincidental. The reader knows that Bublik will be fully accepted neither by the English nor by the Indians. He belongs to neither, and yet he can also partly identify with both: with the former as a white European, and with the latter as a representative of a politically dependent people. The description of the Indian servants as "*aropgefaln fun an ander velt*" acts as more than just an idiom: it is a powerful metaphor of uprootedness and alienation. As an Orthodox Jew born in Grodno, who moved first to Argentina and then to the United States and is en route to his ancient homeland in Palestine, Bublik, too, may be viewed as having come *fun an ander velt* (from another world). Yet where exactly is that other world from which Bublik, or any other Jew, can be said to hail?

The idea of the Jew's inherent foreignness to Europe is central to a number of diverse discourses and ideologies, and it plays an important, if not always easily discernible, role in Yiddish travel writing. When advocated by non-Jewish thinkers and politicians, the view of Jews as alien, was often an expression of hostility and an excuse for persecution. From the German composer Richard Wagner's infamous attack on the subversive influence of European Jewish composers to the Russian philosopher Vasily Rozanov's disarmingly sincere musings on the probability of Mendel Beilis's guilt in light of the enigmatic nature of Jewish faith and ritual, European culture reveals a consistent focus on the *otherness* of Jewish civilization. Furthermore, in part under the influence of biblical imagery, this otherness is often explicitly associated with the Eastern imagery of deserts, camels, spices, strange garb, and dangerous non-Christian customs and incantations. The subject of Europe's orientalization of the Jews was briefly touched upon by Said in *Orientalism* and has been treated extensively in a number of recent

[66] Bublik, *Mayn rayze in Erets-Yisroel*, 13.

studies.[67] None of them, have, however, taken advantage of Yiddish travel writing—despite its obvious relevance.

Separated as they were from their ancient homeland, Jews were seen as eternal wanderers, whose very existence was predicated on their remaining homeless—whether this homelessness be construed as a form of punishment, as in the legend about the Wandering Jew, or as a source of power, as in the various theories of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. On the other hand, many Jews thought of themselves in temporary exile from the land of Israel and considered it their duty not to assimilate into non-Jewish societies. Whether the Jewish attitude was a reaction to or the cause of the non-Jewish view of them, is a question that is far beyond the scope of this dissertation. Yet the more specific question of Europe's exoticization and Orientalization of the Jew and the ways in which Yiddish writers internalized, embraced, or challenged these ideas is indispensable for analyzing modern Yiddish travelogues.

The desire to reveal the hidden, ignored, or even aggressively rejected threads linking East European Jewry to its Christian surroundings dominates the work of Sholem Asch—a writer who at various times enjoyed tremendous popularity with Yiddish readers. Asch was perhaps the only Yiddish writer before the formidable rise of Isaac Bashevis Singer to enjoy such wide international fame outside the confines of the Yiddish-speaking, and even Jewish, world—as evidenced by the multiple translations of his works into several languages, reviews in non-Yiddish periodicals, and the discussions held at the Swedish Academy about the possibility of awarding him the Nobel Prize. The best known example of Asch's literary efforts to claim a central element of the Gentile world as essentially Jewish is his Christological trilogy about Jesus, Apostle Paul, and Mary—whose publication against a backdrop of rising antisemitism on

[67] See, e.g., Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar, eds., *Orientalism and the Jews* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005).

the eve of the Holocaust provoked widespread condemnation from Yiddish critics and readers disillusioned with the possibility of realizing the maskilic vision of a Jewish-Gentile harmonious coexistence.

Particularly telling in this regard are Asch's travel writings. It is in a case like this that one can truly appreciate the immense value and the undeserved obscurity of the travelogue genre, whose nonfictional nature implies, as a rule, a greater degree of immediacy. No character nor narrator mediates communication with the reader; rather the author communicates through his or her own nonfictional voice. This does not necessarily entail a more authentic or reliable authorial voice, yet because of the travelogue's inherent claim of autobiographical truth, the author is held to account more directly, absent the mask of either characters or "unreliable narrators."

As a travel writer, Asch was not particularly prolific—the volume of his works was a mere fraction of the output of Shoshkes, Hirschbein, Ravitch, and other more travel-oriented authors. He did, however, travel extensively and, along with occasional publications in Yiddish newspapers describing his trips, published three travelogues as separate books: two about Palestine and one about Spain (*Mayn rayze iber Shpanye*; My Journey through Spain; 1930). It is the last work that is especially pertinent to the subject of the present chapter. Indeed, Asch's treatment of the "exotic" universe of bullfights and Moorish architecture aptly embodies Yiddish travel writers' search for a home through their observation of other cultures and their ambivalent desire to affirm both Europeanness and Jewishness, which prompted many to Europeanize Jewishness and to Judaize Europe—sometimes in the same text.

Given Spain's prominence in Jewish history and culture, one could easily imagine a Yiddish travelogue of this country, devoted nearly exclusively to its Jewish legacy, both of the

pre-1492 Golden Age and the post-expulsion plight of the Marranos. This was precisely the subject of many Yiddish writings on Spain. This is how the indefatigable Yiddish traveler Shoshkes describes his arrival in Spain: "*Un az ikh hob fun der vaytns derzen Shpanyes erd un di shpitsn fun ire kloysters, hot zikh a shturem oyfgehoybn in hartsn un a vilder kas hot mayn gants vezn bahersht*" (And as I saw the Spanish shore and the spires of Spanish churches, a storm rose in my heart, and a wild fury seized my entire being).[68] The animosity toward a country where Jews had once thrived, only later to be ruthlessly persecuted, is to Shoshkes almost a matter of course—a Jew's natural reaction to Spain. Some writers' tone was not free of schadenfreude. In a short newspaper feuilleton, Yiddish humorist writer Der Tunkeler employs his acerbic wit to portray his visit to Spain as a reversal of the relationship between Spain and the Jewish people:

> *Shpanyen iz gliklekh mikh tsu zen vi ikh batret ir bodn. Shoyn a lengere tsayt, az Shpanyen halt in eyn betn zikh ba mir: kum, kum tsurik. Zay mir moykhl mayne alte khatoim. Ze, ikh bin faroremt, ikh hob zikh banarisht. . . . Oreme Shpanyen-land! Zi veys nisht, az ikh for bloyz farbay. Ikh vel hekhstns farblaybn do a tog-tsvey*."[69]
>
> Spain is lucky to see me setting foot on its [her] soil. Spain has for a long time now been begging me: "Come, come back. Forgive me my old sins. Look how I have become impoverished, I did a stupid thing. . . ." Poor Spanish country! She doesn't know that I am only passing by and won't stay more than a couple of days.

In Der Tunkeler's description, it is Spain that is now the unsuccessful supplicant at the Jews' mercy. But whether the focus was on the happier days of Spanish Jewish history or on its tragic chapters, it was Spain's Jewish legacy that would for most Yiddish writers overshadow in importance everything else about this country.

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[68] Shoshkes, *Lender un shtet: rayze-ayndrukn*, 145.

[69] Der Tunkeler [Yoysef Tunkl] Der Tunkeler [Yoysef Tunkl], "Malaga: notitsn fun an oysflug-rayze," *Der moment* (September 18, 1935): 4.

For Asch, these memories of the medieval period are eclipsed by something strikingly different, namely the energy of Eros and Thanatos in its explicitly non-Jewish manifestations. Abandoning for a while "*di alte shotns . . . fun mayn Shpanyen . . . fun di tunkele geslekh fun Kordova, Granada, Sevilye . . . , di Yehude Halevis, Ibn Ezres, . . . un dem grestn fun ale, Sloyme ibn Gvirol*" (the ancient shadows . . . of *my* Spain . . . of the dark narrow streets of Córdoba, Granada, Seville . . . , the Judah Halevis, Ibn Ezras, . . . and the greatest of them all, Solomon ibn Gabirol [emphasis added]), he immerses himself in the world of Spanish beauties and the bloody spectacle of the corrida.[70] In a veritable apotheosis of non-Jewish sensibility, Asch makes a statement, deserving possibly even greater condemnation than that suffered by *Der man fun Natseres* and its sequels. "*Ikh bin shiker fun blut*" (I am intoxicated from blood), writes Asch, echoing, whether intentionally or otherwise, the centuries-old *blut-bilbl* (blood libel) and a plethora of other images and themes linked to Europe's persecution of the Jews.[71]

Asch himself makes the connection explicit a few pages later: he draws a graphic comparison between the bullfight and the medieval burning of Jews at the stake, or, more precisely, between the audience of which he himself is now a part and a crowd attending an auto-da-fé:

> *Azoy hobn zey gemuzt broyzn un brumen, ven zey hobn derhert, vi dos blut fun lebedike mentshn platst aroys fun ongetsundene odern un knakt oyf in flamen fayer . . . es iz eygntlekh geven dos zelbe shpil mit blut vi itst, nor mit dem khilek, vos yener oksnkamf fun der inkvizitsye iz gebentsht gevorn mit der brokhe fun der kirkh*.[72]
>
> This is how they must have shouted and roared upon hearing how the blood of living people bursts out from the burning veins and crackles in the flame. . . . It

[70] Asch, *Mayn rayze iber Shpanyen*, 5.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid., 14.

> was actually the same game of blood as now, with the only difference that the bullfight of the Inquisition was done with the Church's blessing.

Given such horrific associations, what motivates Asch to embrace the brutality of the bullfight? Is it his desire to understand the enemy? Is it the common human craving for an occasional carnivalesque relief, when ordinary prohibitions are lifted and the moral and social order is turned upside down? While Asch's attitude has elements of both, the two aforementioned motivations are not of central importance.

The crux in Asch's case is his (and other travel writers') search for identity. In this connection, the bullfight's significance is twofold. First, much like Asch's emphatically Jewish Jesus, this experience contributes to identifying common ground between Jews and Gentiles, since both can respond to the basic animalistic instinct. Thus, paradoxically, the potential for violence, which Asch characterizes as "*an instinkt, shtarker un elter fun yid un krist*" (an instinct, stronger and older both Jews and Christians), becomes a positive force for erecting a bridge of understanding between Jews and the rest of humanity: "*nisht nor in zey, nor in mir, in dir, in yedn eynem kon men oyfvekn dem instinkt fun der khaye, vos lebt in undz*" (not only in them, but in me, in you, in everyone one can awaken the animal instincts that live in us).[73] Second, Asch's interest in this celebration of *life* at its most basic and animalistic—through the innocent bull's blood and the Spanish spectators' uninhibited delight in the matador's courage and skill—has yet another, specifically Jewish, element. The idea that generations of East European Jews were deprived of a normal childhood, walled off from the natural world, suppressed intellectually, creatively, sexually, and in countless other ways, became a major theme with the rise of the Haskalah. In their attacks on the traditional system of Jewish education and on the passive and

[73] Ibid., 15.

emasculated behavior of Jewish men, many maskilic thinkers asserted the imperative to reanimate a deadend Jewry by "coming out of the ghetto" through education, exploration of nature, and integration into modern European civilization. A careful analysis of Asch's *Mayn rayze iber Shpanye* reveals elements of such aims and desires, albeit in a very different configuration.

In his travelogue of Spain, Asch addresses with a degree of directness rarely seen in his fictional works the issue of the Jew's suspension between the West and the East:

> *Vos iz dos: . . . Undzer gantse tsivilizatsye iz an eyropeishe, an arishe. . . . Mir hobn gelernt literatur—fun di eyropeishe shrayber. Sheynkeyt fun di plastishe formen fun Rafaels, Mikelandzhelos, Rembrands. Un dokh, ven mir shtoysn zikh on mitn mizrekh, ven mir kumen in barirung mit di sheynkeytn fun di semitishe felker, vern mir yidn punkt azoy vi yener hunt [in "Di shtim fun blut."* [74]
>
> How is this possible? . . . Our entire civilization is European, Aryan. . . . We learned literature from European writers, art—from Raphael, Michelangelo, and Rembrandt. And yet, when we encounter the East, when we come into contact with the beauty of the Semitic peoples, we Jews become like that dog in . . . *The Call of the Wild.*

As a European, he claims equal ownership of the best of what European culture has to offer. Yet in a turn strongly reminiscent of Wagner's antisemitic attack on Mendelssohn and other Jewish-German composers, Asch identifies a potential source of something akin to a betrayal of his Europeanness. By invoking *The Call of the Wild,* Jack London's famous novel about a dog's triumphant reclamation of its wild nature, published in Yiddish under the altered title of *Di shtim fun blut* (*The Call of Blood*) and tremendously popular with Yiddish readers, Asch ingeniously brings together the theme of the bullfight, the memory of the Jewish suffering during the Spanish Inquisition, and the search for cultural identity. If Jews came from the East and were perceived by Europeans as being accordingly alien, then embracing the exoticism of Spain, in which he

[74] Ibid., 76.

felt, or else wanted or imagined to feel, at home due both to his Jewish roots and his personal philosophy of affirming *life*, was for Asch a pathway to achieving the desired sense of belonging.

The search for commonalities is one of the most consistent themes in Asch's account of his journey across Spain—its leitmotif. Whether he is reporting his conversation with a Spanish priest, in which they discuss their shared victimhood in the Ku Klux Klan's persecution of "*yidn, katolikn un negers*" (Jews, Catholics, and Negroes), or is mentioning the same priest's assertion that a large portion of the Spanish population is composed of descendants of the Marranos—"*yeder driter fun undz hot yidish blut*" (every third person among us has Jewish blood)—Asch's aim is to claim partial ownership of Spain for himself as a Jew.[75] Yet, however strong Asch's specifically Jewish motivations, there was a lot of the European in his intoxication and infatuation with Spain. The Saidian model of Orientalism as the West's exoticizing, eroticizing, and objectifying the East can be easily applied to Asch's polychrome vision of "*kolirn, kolirn fun royt oysgegosn iber a shvartsn yam*" (colors, colors: the red overflowing over the black sea) or "*tsimring-broyne kolirn fun nakete orems, pleytses, nakete brustn… kolirn fun shpanishe shaln, royte bender farflokhtene in shvartse hor. . . .*" (the cinnamon-brown of naked arms, shoulders, naked breasts . . . the colors of Spanish shawls, red bands woven into the black hair . . .).[76] Unsurprisingly, in a passage describing Spanish women's enchanting eyes, Asch refers directly to the work that has always been central to the discussion of Orientalism in modern literary criticism, *One Thousand and One Nights*: "*Oygn, vos redn tsu dir, un tsien dikh vi kishef tsu zey. Du verst farvandlt in a held fun 'Toyznt un eyn nakht."*" (Eyes that talk to you and pull you toward them as if through magic. You turn into a character of *One Thousand and One Nights*.) It

[75] Ibid., 67.

[76] Ibid., 6.

is useful here to consider Asch's description of Damascus in his travel book on Palestine, in which the idea of the opposition between the liberating Orient and the oppressive Occident is made fully explicit: "*Damesek iz di oryentalishste shtot un vayt un fremd fun di tsivilizirte velt. Ales lebt nokh vi a mol in di gute alte tsaytn*."[77] (Damascus is the most Oriental city and is far from and foreign to the civilized world. Everything in it is living like in the good old days.) While *di gute alte tsaytn* is a fixed expression and could be used in a neutral or else ironic way, the exuberant tone of Asch's portrayals in both travelogues leaves little doubt as to the genuine nature of his attraction.

Once again, the position of the Jewish traveler proves to be more complicated: for Asch, the bloody and the erotic represent not only a European's liberation from the inhibitions and sobriety imposed by Western civilization but also a Jew's liberation from the perhaps even deeper and more powerful restrictions and taboos, such as the aversion to animal blood. It is not so much the religious regulations of Judaism that Asch is challenging here. What is much more critical to him is contrasting present-day Spain and the Jewish Spain of his childhood imagination with the emotional stuffiness of traditional East European Jewish life. As often happens in travelogues, impressions of the present bring back memories of a distant past. Recalling his days as a yeshiva student, Asch describes how Spanish Jewish literature quieted his "*khalesh-fardurshte neshome*" (desperately thirsty soul), which was seeking an escape "*fun der trukener midber-halokhe*" (from the arid desert of the Halacha).[78] Throughout his book, having equated Spain with *life*—i.e., being truly alive, aware, and creatively inspired—Asch constructs a chain of representations of *life*, which culminates in his impressions of seeing Goya's

[77] Sholem Asch, *Erets-Yisroel* (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1927), 182.

[78] Asch, *Mayn rayze iber Shpanyen*, 16.

paintings: "*Goya. — Ikh shenk dir gants Shpanye, gib mir Goya, derfar, vayl Goya iz lebn. Vu dos lebn — dort bin ikh*."[79] (Goya. — I give you all of Spain, give me Goya, because Goya is life. Wherever there is life—there am I.) A progression thus emerges: from the bullfight to the vibrancy of colors, to eroticism, to Goya, and, finally, to himself.

Spain's duality provides Asch with an excellent opportunity, being both European and exotically Oriental, both Christian and historically Jewish, both relevant to his childhood and to his adult self. Attempting to bridge and reconcile the multiple valences of Asch's identity, his travelogue is thus a profoundly Jewish work. In the final analysis, Asch's Orientalist impulse to exoticize is aimed less at Spain than at himself—his own notion of Jewishness in general and of his own American-European-Jewish identity in particular. However Jewish, his and many other Yiddish writers' travelogues also belong unmistakably to the literary tradition of European romanticism. The idea of travel as a source of spiritual and aesthetic growth—often independent from the specific destination or any "practical" goals—developed as a major literary theme in nineteenth century Europe. This attitude and view of travel is absent from the famous medieval Hebrew travelogue by Benjamin of Tudela, or other premodern works. While a medieval pilgrimage was by definition understood as a spiritual experience, its spiritual value did not derive from the temporary condition of homelessness. The new discourse rose to prominence in the works of such Romantic poets as Byron, Coleridge, and Shelley, or, within the East European context, Poland's Mickiewicz and Słowacki, and Russia's Pushkin and Lermontov. For East European Jews, the exploration and internalization of these notions were thus part of their adoption of new aesthetic ideas and their discovery of modernity.

[79] Ibid., 41.

It was especially in the field of poetry that the influence of non-Jewish models on the Yiddish discourse of wandering is immediately apparent. The 1926 poem by H. Royznblat is a perfect embodiment of the Yiddish neo-romantic discourse of travel:

„איך בין ניט איך!
איך בין אַן אַנדערער —
אַן אומבאַקאַנטער פֿון אַ ווײַטן, ווײַטן לאַנד:
אַ פֿרעמדער מענטש בין איך, אַ וואַנדערער!

און אַלצדינג וואָס אַ וואַנדערער דערציילט —
איז נײַ . . . איז וווּנדערלעך אַזוי: —
די ווײַטע לענדער שטענדיק גרין,
דער פֿרעמדער הימל — אייביק בלוי.[80]

I am not I!
I am a different one —
An unknown one from a faraway land:
I am a stranger, a wanderer!
And everything that a wanderer tells —
Is new . . . and so wonderful:
The distant countries are always green,
The strange sky — always blue. (ellipsis in original)

The paradoxical statement of the opening line is the key to this poem's overall message. Does saying "I am not I" imply that the real "I" is not yet fully known to and assimilated by its own bearer, who is still dominated by the false "I"? Or is the speaker referring to an act of intentional dissimulation? Indeed, these four short words encapsulate much of the struggle of a whole generation of Yiddish writers to define their identity. When asked to contribute an essay for a volume commemorating Peretz Hirschbein's sixtieth birthday, it was this very poem that Royznblat quoted as part of his reflections on the deeper meaning of Hirschbein's unusual path in Yiddish literature, including his devotion to travel.[81]

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[80] H. Royznblat, *Unter gots himlen: tsveyte zamlung lider* (Detroit: Sholem-Aleykhem br[entsh] hundert un fir, Id[isher] Nats[yonaler] Arb[eter] Farb[and], 1920), 98–99. The poem was originally published in H. Royznblat's 1926 collection "Bloye flamen."

[81] Shmuel Niger and Mendl Elkin, eds., *Perets Hirshbeyn: tsu zayn zekhtsikstn geboyrn-tog* (New York: Hirshbeyn yoyvl komitet, 1941), 98–99. The poem was originally published in H. Royznblat's 1926 collection "Bloye flamen."

Moreover, anyone familiar with classic Russian literature, as were the majority of Yiddish poets of Royznblat's generation, would immediately recognize the striking similarity between Royznblat's tone and imagery and the first stanza of Lermontov's 1832 poetic "self-introduction"—one of the most famous texts of Russian poetry:

> *Нет, я не Байрон, я другой,*
> *Ещё неведомый избранник,*
> *Как он, гонимый миром странник,*
> *Но только с русскою душой.*
>
> No, I am not Byron, I am another one,
> A chosen one, who has not yet been revealed,
> Like he—a wanderer persecuted by the world,
> But with a Russian soul.

It is easy to see the appeal of the main themes of Lermontov's poem for a Jewish reader: not only does it address exile, persecution, and homeless wandering, but it also involves the adoption of a foreign aesthetic model and its adaptation to a different cultural background—precisely the project of many Yiddish intellectuals.

Unlike Lermontov, however, Yiddish modernist neo-romantics were often grappling with foreign models that were both inspiring and openly hostile to Jews. The two most powerful themes "vulnerable" to empowering and potentially subversive Jewish reinterpretations were those of Jesus and of the Wandering Jew. Emphasizing the Jewishness of Jesus, as Asch, Manger, and many other Yiddish writers did, was in a sense a simpler task than drawing inspiration from the image of the Wandering Jew, Ahasuerus—condemned to wander until the Second Coming for taunting Jesus on the latter's way to Mount Golgotha. This legend began to spread through Europe around the thirteenth century, and it encapsulated the notion of the Jews' existence as a "cursed people" bearing divine punishment and serving as a continued proof of the truth of Christianity. The figure of the Wandering Jew entered European literature in the second

half of the eighteenth century and has remained an appealing subject for Western writers ever since.

While some of the literary depictions of Ahasuerus presented this character as a lonely rebel and were not altogether devoid of the typical romantic hero motifs, most, including those written at the height of European Romanticism, tended to have unmistakably negative connotations, as exemplified in Shelley's *The Wandering Jew*:

> "Wild anguish glooms my brow;
> His flaming mark is fixed on my head,
> And must there remain in traces dread;
> I feel—I feel it now!"
>
> As thus he spoke grew dark the sky,
> Hoarse thunders murmured awfully,
> "O Demon! I am thine!" he cried,
> A hollow, fiendish voice replied,
> "Come! For thy doom is misery!"[82]

Shelley's linking of Ahasuerus with the themes of death, doom, and misery are typical. Indeed, the Christian framework within which the English poet is operating, does not allow this ultimate Jewish blasphemer to be conceived in a positive manner. It would almost be as hard to imagine for Bram Stoker's bloodthirsty Dracula—a character also partially modeled on the Wandering Jew—which captured the European imagination around the turn of the twentieth century.

Redeeming the Wandering Jew as a positive figure—if a deeply problematic one—was a potentially appealing task for a Jewish poet, and one that young Dovid Eynhorn (1886–1973) approached with youthful enthusiasm. The result of his efforts was *Khaloymes fun a vanderer* (The Dreams of a Wanderer; 1913), a novella dominated by nationalist and messianic motifs and constructed around the romantic paradigm of the poet as lonely hero. Published shortly after its

[82] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Wandering Jew* (London, 1887), 66.

author's move to Paris following a half-year imprisonment in Vilna for Marxist activities associated with the Bund, this work, while not a classic travelogue, contains all the chief elements of romanticized travel imagery that would define one of the most characteristic trends within twentieth-century Yiddish travel literature. On its surface, *Khaloymes fun a vanderer* might easily appear a somewhat immature literary experiment—disappointingly inconclusive in its message, excessively sentimental in style, and replete with the standard Decadent clichés. The novella's inarguable literary shortcomings notwithstanding, in its exceptionally deep, clear, and consistent romanticization of *homelessness*, Eynhorn's novella stands out for its uniquely direct and bold treatment of the Wandering Jew motif.

The loss of home has many different connotations in Eynhorn's work and is not limited to the geographic realm. Already in the prologue, the narrator's romantic yearning for an idealized *yidishe tokhter* (a Jewish maiden/woman) comes to the fore: "*Farlozn vayt in fremde lender, fartribn fun land, vu du gefinst zikh nokh efsher, blondzhe ikh um tsvishn farsheydene froyen,—nor umetum ze ikh nor dikh, tayere yidishe tokhter*" (Deserted far away in foreign countries, exiled from the country where you may still be living, I wander around among different women, yet everywhere I only see you, oh dear Jewish maiden).[83] The female figure described here is overtly generalized and impersonal; needing no name, she is an archetype, a symbol of desirability and purity. The narrator's sense of loss with regard to the *yidishe tokhter* is merged with his agonizing nostalgia for the purity of his native shtetl's traditional Jewish lifestyle, and both objects of his longing are contrasted with the alien world of Paris, including its women, street life, and architecture. Eynhorn's novella eroticizes the trappings of the shtetl's

[83] Dovid Eynhorn, "Khaloymes fun a vanderer: fun di shriftn fun an eynzamen yidn," *Di yidishe velt* no. 3 (March 1913): 44–45.

yidishkeyt, such as sabbath candles, *Tsene-rene*, and *peysekhdike shmalts* (Passover fat).[84] The narrator's exile is thus multidimensional; it is linguistic, religious, cultural, physical, and sexual.

The chasm separating Jew from Gentile—no matter how secularized and Europeanized the former or how tolerant the latter—seems unbridgeable in the novella: "*Eynzam hob ikh geblondzhet tsvishn di breyte parizer bulvarn. Ontsiend un fremd zenen mir geven di mentshn, ontsiend fremd zeyere zorgloze, gutmutike, sheyne penemer.*"[85] (I wandered all alone through Paris's big boulevards. I found the people there carefree, good natured, pretty faces captivating and strange.) Having described the festive atmosphere of the Parisian streets, the narrator laments his own inability to join in this celebration of love and lightheartedness: "*Un tsaytnvayz hot epes tif in mir fardrosn, far vos ikh ken azoy freylekh nisht zayn, vi zey, azoy laykhtzinik, vi zey; far vos mayn neshome iz farshlosn far di vareme zunen-shtraln, vos gisn zikh arayn, vi vayn, in zeyer blut*" (And occasionally it upset me that I am not capable of feeling so happy as they, so lighthearted as they; why is my soul shut to the warm rays of the sun that flow like wine in their blood?).[86] In a manner evocative of its use by Asch in his description of the Spanish bullfight, blood appears as a trope throughout Eynhorn's novella, carrying the full array of its standard connotations: death, peoplehood, life, and love.

As a literary theme, travel has strong sexual connotations, linked to the themes of a traveler's anonymity, unexpected sexual opportunities, differing moral and social standards, the abandonment of traditional religious constraints, and, significantly, the eroticization of foreignness in general and of "exotic" places and people in particular. *Khaloymes fun a vanderer*

[84] Ibid., 44.

[85] Ibid., 46.

[86] Ibid.

reverses this relationship through its narrator's consistent effort to denigrate everything foreign and to portray the place whence he came as the constant object of his longing and desire. It likewise reverses the standard opposition between the shtetl's lack of sophistication and the alluring elegance of the enlightened European metropolis: the term *aristokratish* (aristocratic) is here reserved for the description of the pious Jewish girl's face.[87] It is neither the modern, accessible, and sexually emancipated women of Paris, nor its prostitutes that convey an aura of sexual excitement, but rather the innocent Jewish girl "*mit a tifer benkshaft un umbavuste shemevdike meydlshe farlangen*" (with a deep yearning and as yet unconscious and shy feminine desires). This ideal figure of Jewish femininity has little interest in flirting with strange men or engaging in any of the "modern" pursuits; her idea of pleasure is reading "*fun der mames tsene-rene di sheyne mayse fun Yankev mit Rokhlen*" (the beautiful story about Jacob and Rachel from mother's *Tsene-rene*), while her little brother "*dremlt ibern khumesh*" (has fallen asleep over the Torah).[88]

The prologue's sexual energy is further intensified by the narrator's addressing the girl directly: "*Un dayn yunge brust heybt zikh shtark, di shvartse farkholemte oygn shaynen ba di oysgeyendke shabes-likht, un di mit yugnt batoyte lipn suden mit libe:* '*Yankev . . .*'" (and your young bosom rises the black dreamy eyes are shining in the light of the dying candles, and the lips, covered in youth's dew, are murmuring with love: "Jacob . . . ").[89] The use of the second-person narrative contributes to the deeply intimate and confessional tone. Speaking directly to the pure object of his desire, the narrator describes his encounters with foreign women and

[87] Ibid., 44.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid.

presents his catalog of European nations according to the nature and degree of their sexual depravity: the French women have "*shlanke kerper"* (slender bodies) and *"batsoyberndike, laydnshaftlekhe blikn*" (enchanting passionate glances); the Germans possess "*tirishe laydnshaftnn un zindike instinktn*" (animal passions and sinful instincts); and the Italians "*tsien un shrekn mit zeyere blikn*" (lure and frighten with their glances).[90] Clearly, the incarnation of the Jewish *tsnies* (modesty) is hardly a suitable audience for such descriptions. In fact, the second person address makes her slightly complicit: in a certain sense, she, too, partakes of the foreign debauchery. She, too, is taken on a tour of Western Europe, which, based on the narrator's diatribe, assumes the traits of a giant brothel symbolizing moral filth and cultural disorientation.

Somewhat counterintuitively, the two opposing universes—Jewish piety and sinful modernity—strengthen each other's romantic power. The narrator's position as a lonely wanderer far away from home establishes him as a romantic figure with literary associations ranging from Odysseus to Don Quixote to Child Harolde. In fact, the theme of knighthood is introduced directly in lines that could serve as a fitting motto for much of Yiddish travel literature: "*Yo, ikh bin der riter funem altn troyer / 'vandern un benken' dos iz mayn deviz. / Nor in mir bahaltn flakert nokh der fayer / fun dem groysn, altn, shtoltsn mizrekh-riz*."[91] (Yes, I am the knight of the ancient sorrow — / "To wander and to long"—this is my motto. / But concealed in me, the flame is still burning / Of the great, ancient, proud giant of the East.) Significantly, these lines imply that wandering has a military aspect; it is thus at least partially a conscious choice and perhaps a high duty.

[90] Ibid., 45.

[91] Ibid., 46.

There is a degree of ambiguity as to whether the word *vanderer* in the novella's title refers primarily to the narrator or to the old man he encounters—who turns to be the Wandering Jew Ahasuerus himself. There are compelling reasons to believe that this ambiguity was fully intended by the author. It is the narrator who first mentions the name Ahasuerus: "*O, tayere libnvirdike frantsoyzn! Tsi den hot ir shoyn fargesn a yidishn ponem? Blondzhet nisht ven durkh ayere breyte bulvarn, der hoykher, beyzer Ahasver? Falt nisht ven zayn toyzntyoriker shotn af ayere palatsn?*" (O dear charming Frenchmen! Have you then already forgotten what a Jewish face looks like? Is he not roaming on your big boulevards—the tall and fierce Ahasuerus? Does his shadow not sometimes fall on your palaces?) Then, out of thin air, Ahasuerus appears in the disguise of a shady souteneur and confirms, "*Yo, gevis*" (Yes, of course).[92] It is as if the narrator's restless thoughts, or perhaps *khaloymes* (dreams) of loneliness and exile, brought the Wandering Jew into being.

At first, the old man appears merely to be eager to supply the melancholy narrator with some good "merchandise." It is only gradually that he reveals himself to be none other than *der eybiker yid*, or the Eternal Jew, which is the literal meaning of this figure's designation in Yiddish, Russian, and other East European languages. In the course of the novella, the old pimp develops into the towering figure of a national leader and an embodiment of the Jews' exile and suffering on the one hand and of their greatness and unique historical mission on the other:

סעראיניגם די שמימען,
זאָל קנאַלען אַ חנער!
עס וויסט אונז דער נרויסער, דער אייבינער יוד,
דער אייבינער סיהרער
פֿון העלם, דער מערטירער,
דער היטער פֿון אמת, פֿון ליעבע און פֿריד.
סעראיניגם די שמימען![93]

[92] Ibid., 46–47.

[93] Ibid., 57.

Unite your voices,
May there roar a thunder!
The great Eternal Jew is calling you,
The eternal leader
Of the world, the martyr,
The Guardian of the Truth, of Love and Peace.
Unite your voices!

The heroic and elevated tone of these lines conveys the enormous power of someone for whom the appellation "towering figure" is more than a turn of phrase. At one point, Ahasuerus begins to grow until he is "*shoyn glaykh mitn Ayfl-turem*" (equal in height to the Eiffel Tower) and literally casts his shadow over the entire city of Paris: "*der shotn fun groysn velt-martirer af der groyser veltshtot*" (the great martyr's shadow over the great city).[94]

Yet martyr is by no means Ahasuerus's only role. Taken at face value, some of his statements suggest that he is destructive, vengeful, and fundamentally antithetical to Europe's culture, and, in their potential connotations, are reminiscent of such infamous antisemitic works as the forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Eynhorn adopts an essentially hostile theme and transforms it into an element of his messianic phantasmagoria. Indeed, Eynhorn's Wandering Jew has much in common with such characters as Shakespeare's Shylock and Dickens's "archetypal Jewish villain" Fagin.[95] Ahasuerus's plan of action includes relying on such human vices as "*tsefoylenish, tayve, znus, retsikhe*" (decay, lust, whoredom, violence), with which he claims to have destroyed Rome and is now destroying "*di moderne velt*" (the modern world) and on the demonic forces of "*bazigte geter*" (defeated gods).[96] The loss of a clear boundary between good and evil is part of this messianic figure's paradoxical nature and apocalyptic vision. He is

[94] Ibid., 58.

[95] Irving Howe, in *Oliver Twist*, by Charles Dickens, Introduction (New York: Bantam, 1982).

[96] Eynhorn, "Khaloymes fun a vanderer: fun di shriftn fun an eynzamen yidn," 63.

not only the destroyer and the avenger, but also the victim and the defender: "*der, vemen ir hot doyres-lang di blut fargosn; ikh bin der, vos hot doyres-lang tsvishn aykh frid un libe farshpreyt*" (he whose blood you have been spilling for generations; I am he who has for generations preached peace and love among you).[97]

Ahasuerus's ambivalent nature is linked to another travel-related paradox in the novella: in order to gain awareness of the Jewish people's enormous mission—as well as to develop a new appreciation of the pure *yidishe tokhter*—the narrator must undergo a form of exile, to live outside his natural milieu. He must immerse himself in the foreignness of Paris—a city celebrated by his contemporaries as an epitome of artistic, intellectual, and sexual freedom. Indeed, Paris functions as a distinct character in Eynhorn's work and is an integral part of the novella's thematic structure. Quite separate from its human residents and visitors, elements of the city come alive: "*di valn fun der Sene . . . un di shteyner fun di alte brikn heybn on redn*" (the waves of the Seine . . . and the cobbles of the old bridges begin to talk).[98] Likewise, Parisian architecture appears as an assemblage of strange creatures, in whose appearance and personalities is reflected the depravity of Paris's residents: *"Vayter a bisl bam breg himl in der zindiker shayn fun Monmartr iz geshtanen di kirkhe fun dem kvartal un vi gekukt mit kine afn Notr-Dam*" (A bit further at the edge of the sky in the sinful illumination of the Montmartre stood that quarter's church and seemed to be jealously looking at the Notre Dame).[99]

It is by virtue of being exiled among the towers and crowds of Paris that the narrator attains the personal and national self-awareness sufficient for discovering Ahasuerus—a

[97] Ibid., 53.

[98] Ibid., 49.

[99] Ibid., 54.

powerful voice of hope, truth, and national regeneration. Whether an outside force, or part of his own consciousness, it is a voice that represents the potential for a synthesis of enticing but misleading modernity and eternal Jewish determination and creativity. Other Yiddish writers, most notably Y. L. Peretz, had already formulated part of this synthesis, demonstrating that many themes in traditional East European Jewish culture were supremely suited to those of neoromantic and modernist writing. Of particular resonance were the ideas that greatness may be discerned in the lowest, meanest places, and that purity may be found in filth, power in weakness. Hence, it stands to reason that the Messiah-like figure of Ahasuerus is disguised as a pimp, while one of the prostitutes working under him has a "*tifer, gloybiker kuk*" (deep, devoted look), expressive of "*tsar af goles-hashkhine*" (grief over the Shechinah's exile) and who may thus represent the Shechinah itself.[100] Central to Hasidic folklore, which in turn partially drew on cabbalistic mysticism, these themes of moral, aesthetic, and mystical paradoxes held much promise for Yiddish letters.

Finally, while not particularly prominent, there is also a political dimension in Eynhorn's novella. Toward the work's end, the narrator receives a blessing from Ahasuerus and is commanded to be "*a riter fun eybikn yidn*" (the Wandering Jew's knight) and to follow "*dem veg fun zayne zeydes*" (the path of his grandfathers). Given Eynhorn's political involvements, it is easy to interpret a socialist message in Ahasuerus's summary of the Jewish people's unique path: "*Mit derner iz er ful, lang un breyt. Nor er firt fun dem groysn altn frimorgn fun der fargangenheyt tsu dem groysn frimorgn fun der tsukunft, fun dem getroymtn glik — tsu dem virklekhn*."[101] (It is covered with thorns long and wide. But it leads from the great old morning of

[100] Ibid.

[101] Ibid., 63.

the past to the great morning of the future, from imagined happiness to a real one). Whether viewed through the prism of culture, mysticism, or politics, Ahasuerus is the archetypal Jewish wanderer; he is the ultimate Jewish traveler. Eynhorn's use of this Christian motif reflects his struggle to find a balance between the adoption of a European (and typically *Eurocentric*) perspective and of the internalization of surrounding cultures' propensity to exoticize and *orientalize* the Jew. The result of his search, given literary manifestation, is the notion of wandering as the quintessential Jewish quality, associated both with the Jews' ancient origins and with what is argued as their powerful position within European culture.

Despite profound differences, there is a clear link between Eynhorn's work and that of the earlier generation of classic Yiddish writers, particularly Sholem-Yankev Abramovitsh, for whom Eynhorn had served as private secretary only a few years before writing *Khaloymes fun a vanderer*.[102] The use of metaphors for conveying a grand vision of the Jews' plight and mission is at the center of Abramovitsh's *Di klyatshe* (The Nag; 1873), in which the suffering Jewish people is represented by a broken-down mare, while the evil forces controlling the Jewish fate are embodied in the supernatural figure of "the King of the Demons," Ashmeday.[103] The novel's protagonist is the Jewish boy Yisrolik, whose vulnerability and unstable foundation are accentuated by his airborne condition during the tour of the world given to him by Ashmeday. Not unlike the narrator of Eynhorn's novella, Yisrolik is an uprooted *luftmentsh* (impractical person without a definite occupation; literally, "a person of the air")—this case, quite literally so. There are further parallels between Abramovitsh's nag and Eynhorn's prostitute: both represent the *disease* and at the same time the promise of eventual *recovery*. Finally, there are obvious

[102] Shifra Kuperman, "Eynhorn, Dovid," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

[103] Sh. Y. Abramovitsh, "Di klyatshe," in *Geklibene verk*, vol. 2 (New York: IKUF, 1946).

similarities between Ashmeday and Ahasuerus. Despite the fact that the King of the Demons exhibits none of the Eternal Jew's positive features, they both perform a similar function in enlightening the protagonist about life's fundamental principles—especially in regard to human suffering.

Another similarity between the two works can be discerned, related to Dan Miron's notion of Yiddish writers' "Judaization" of the Gentile world around them. Drawing on Miron's ideas, Leah Garrett notes that Yiddish writers "often reconceived the world as a *Jewish* space" and "were not defining themselves in relation or in opposition to a broader non-Jewish world but were defining the broader world on their own terms, with their Jewish experience in the center."[104] Although in a manner distinctly different from works by Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, or by other Yiddish writers of that generation, Eynhorn, while literarily relishing the Parisian world's foreignness, turns this very foreignness into an element of a Jewish phantasmagoria of cosmic dimensions. At the time of its publication, *Khaloymes fun a vanderer* was a profoundly modern work, and it adumbrated a body of literature that was to emerge in the aftermath of such catastrophic events as the two world wars. As in the poetry of the Inzikhists—which, to use Ruth Wisse's apt formulation, reflected "the displacement of the Jew, the immigrant, the poet" and revealed "the dislocation of man in the universe, an ontology of homelessness"—Eynhorn's work expresses a complex struggle with issues of identity, nostalgia, and estrangement.[105]

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[104] Leah V. Garrett, *Journeys beyond the Pale: Yiddish Travel Writing in the Modern World* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 4, 25.

[105] Ruth R. Wisse, *A Little Love in Big Manhattan: Two Yiddish Poets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 136.

The interlinking of the theme of alienation and the notion of national rebirth and empowerment, as in *Khaloymes fun a vanderer*, was neither obvious nor necessary. The Great War produced an atmosphere of deep pessimism and disillusionment throughout European culture, and Yiddish literature was no exception. For East European Jews, World War I, coupled with the Civil War in Russia, was a calamity of enormous proportions. The brutal scenes of death and destruction, the uprooting of entire communities, and the staggering number of casualties, could not but contribute to Yiddish writers' sense of alienation from European culture. In this context, what was unsurprising was the appearance of disease as one of the most prominent new themes of travel-related Yiddish writing. A medicalized discourse of the Jewish condition had existed in Yiddish literature since the early days of the Haskalah and was adapted to a wide variety of artistic, religious, and political agendas. What was new was the emergence of a pathologized view of the Jewish experience of foreignness—a striking reversal of the maskilic pathologization of the Jewish shtetl's backwardness and isolation from European civilization.

The theme of disease and a profound pessimism is what sets apart Beynish Zilbershteyn's long poem *Sankt-Helene-indzl* (The Island of St. Helena; 1925) from Eynhorn's *Khaloymes fun a vanderer*.[106] More than in any other Yiddish work of the interwar period, the subject of physical decay is passionately described and closely linked to the notion of a cultural and moral degradation resulting from prolonged exposure to a world of exoticism. Today largely forgotten, Zilbershteyn had many personal encounters with hardship and disease. The son of an impoverished melamed, he became physically disabled at the age of nine and began writing as a young man, without ever gaining serious recognition. Written between 1923 and 1924, *Sankt-Helene-indzl* was published as a separate book the following year and had many original

[106] Benish Zilbershteyn, *Sankt-Helene-indzl* (Warsaw: Sh. Yatshkovski, 1925).

features, including an unusual shape and format. The book is designed as a wide rectangle, and, given its morbid subject matter, it is hard to avoid associations with a coffin. The poem is divided into two parts, designated with the Jewish letters *Alef* and *Beys*, respectively, while each part is further subdivided into stanzas indicated by Roman numerals. There is a total of forty-one stanzas on unnumbered pages, and the overall look is somewhat evocative of Dante's *Divine Comedy*—a work that is explicitly referenced by the speaker: "*ikh hob gelitn mer shoyn, tsendlik mol mer vi ba Dante in gehenem*" (I have already suffered more, ten times more, than in Dante's hell).[107] Indeed, while the term *canto* is not used explicitly, the poem's subtitle is "*a gezang in II teyl*" (a song in two parts) and the first stanza is preceded by a telling clarification: "*A farmishpeter zingt*" (The song of the condemned one). The entire work is thus a series of cantos, or else psalms, which together constitute a narrative that contains elements of a travelogue, confession, prayer, and medical history.

The work's multiple aspects are ingeniously reflected in its title. As indicated in a footnote at the beginning of the book, "Sankt-Helene-indzl" was the name of a small hill on the premises of Szpital św. Łazarza, a Warsaw hospital founded in the sixteenth century, specializing in venereal diseases. This reference would not necessarily have been understood by every reader, and the obscurity of the locale is indicated by the very inclusion of the footnote. The more obvious allusion is to the tropical island that was the site of Napoleon's final exile and death. Indeed, the Napoleonic theme is present throughout the poem, and the figure of the French emperor serves as a complex and powerful metaphor. The title's Christian connotations are significant as well, given the work's religious themes and its treatment of the figure of Jesus as a potential addressee of the speaker's prayers. Likewise, the inclusion of a woman's name in the

[107] Ibid., II:16.

title foreshadows the critical role that the speaker assigns to women in his life. Moreover, whether or not the allusion to the central female character of *The Iliad* was part of the author's intentions, the brutal bloodshed initiated in the name of a woman in Homer's epic poem has definite parallels in Zilbershteyn's narrative of a man fighting a host of venereal diseases as a result of his sexual exploits.

Based solely on its title, one would be well justified in taking this book for a geographic overview or a travelogue; it would not have been the only Yiddish text on the island of Saint Helena. One Jewish traveler, in a detailed description of his visit to the island where "*Napoleon hot gerikht goles*" (Napoleon lived in exile), notes that its population includes "*a sakh negers, indyaner, un a kleyner teyl englender*" (many Negroes, Indians, and a small English population), while "*keyn yidn zaynen dortn in gantsn nisht benimtse*" (there is not a single Jew there).[108] The complete absence of Jews seems to further accentuate the place's remoteness. Although Zilbershteyn's poem does not explicitly describe the remote island in the Atlantic, it does, however, address the subject of *goles* and the state of separation from the Jewish people.

The image of the non-Jewish world presented in *Sankt-Helene-indzl* is a peculiar combination of exoticization, mythologization, eroticization, and pathologization. Much like in Eynhorn's novella, there is a dreamy quality to the poem's descriptions of foreign places:

> *S'shtaygt oyf an ekho, — ergets shtet . . . parizer gasn, nyu-yorker brodveyen, / elektri-lompn — shpete nekht . . . tsehong'ne bilder af di vent; / a klingeray, a hirzheray — an ayln fun tselozene tramvayen, / tselinders, vayse hentshkes . . . , oysgeshtrekte betldike hent.*[109]
>
> An echo rises — somewhere there are cities . . . Parisian streets, New York boulevards, / electric street lamps — late nights… Paintings hanging on walls; /

[108] Her[ts?], "A bazukh af Napoleons indzl: ayndrukn fun a bazukh afn indzl Sankt-Helene," *Undzer tsaytung* (January 5, 1936): 3.

[109] Zilbershteyn, *Sankt-Helene-indzl*, 25.

> Din, clamor — the rushing of dissolute streetcars, / Top hats, white gloves . . . , stretched out begging hands. (ellipses in original)

Contrasted with the alien world of dissolution is the idealized picture of his hometown: "*Kh'dermon mit hislayves yed' Galitsyens vinkele un ort*" (I recall with enthusiasm Galicia's every corner and place).[110] Despite the mention of "*mekhtike Karpatn*" (mighty Carpathians) and a few other such details specifically associated with Galicia, for the most part the speaker's memories of the idyllic site of his childhood are expressed through *absences* rather than *presences*. The Galician shtetl's purity lies primarily in its lack of exotic features: "*Ikh veys az s'trogt nisht oys dayn erd in tifenish keyn eylbirtn un tanen, / keyn faygnbeymer un oykh nisht keyn tsaytike bananen-nis; / derfar iz dort mayn vigl un mayn vayse, bleykhe yugnt yo faranen — / un mer vi eylbirt-gertner zenen ot di zoymen mayne zis*." (I know that your soil does not bear in its depth olive trees, pines, / or fig trees or else ripe banana nuts [*sic*]; / But my cradle and my white pale youth are certainly there — / And more than olive gardens these seeds of mine are sweet.)[111] The alluring literary imagery associated with foreign places is here denied, as if it connoted a menace and its unsuitability for Galicia were a guarantee of the latter's purity. As is demonstrated repeatedly throughout the poem, indulging in exoticism and sophistication comes at the expense of moral and physical health. The speaker's departure from home is thus equated with the loss of paradise, and it is only by reconnecting with his roots that he can hope to recover, even partially, his original innocence: "*Afn vegn zigzagdik in fremd avek—gelozn kh'hob ganeydn-tropn / Un efsher vi a mol ikh bin nokh itster tsniesdik un reyn?*" (On the

[110] Ibid., II:5.

[111] Ibid., 33.

zigzagging roads I went to strange places—leaving the drop of paradise, / And maybe like then I am still even now modest and pure?).[112]

The speaker's connection with the figure of Napoleon is made plain early in the poem. Just like the Emperor, who, enamored of both carnal and military conquest, paid the ultimate price for his overambition by being imprisoned and dying on a remote island, so is the speaker of *Sankt-Helene-indzl* punished for leaving his natural milieu to hunt for exotic culture and love. He, too, is now a prisoner, debilitated by disease and filled with frustration and regret: "*ikh veys—kh'vel foyln in a tfise oder in a hoyz far meshugoim, / finf krankeytn, nishtheylbare, mayn guf hot khutspedik fardekt, — / un vel ikh konen ven a kheshbn opgebn far mayne maysim-roim?*" (I know—I will rot in prison or in a madhouse, / Five incurable diseases have insolently covered my body, — / And will I ever be able to give an account of my evil deeds?). Standing alone at the crest of a hill, the patient chokes with anger at the people below who, in their indifference, prejudices, and *tsvies* (hypocrisy), would never be able to imagine his suffering, which includes syphilis, psoriasis, and lupus: "*Ir, shtinkendike bandes, shrotsim nidrike, kh'tsetret aykh mit mayne shtivl*" (You, stinking gangs, lowly vermin, I trample you down with my boots!).[113] The poem's final line, in which the speaker's *vide* (confession) is compared to "*tifstn thom fun oyfgebroyztn yam*" (the deepest abyss of the raging sea), would be enough to dispel any remaining doubts concerning the work's allusions to the actual island of Saint Helena and its unhappy captive.[114]

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[112] Ibid., 32.

[113] Ibid., 14.

[114] Ibid., 47.

The poem's language conveys a sense of deep connection with traditional Jewish culture. Thus, it abounds in traditional religious notions and Hebrew-derived words: the speaker refers to his *seyfer-hazikhroynes* (annals),[115] likens his lamentations to "*klingendike kadeyshim*" (ringing prayers for the dead),[116] and plans "*faln koyrim*" (to prostrate oneself),[117] to mention only a few examples. Yet behind this seeming inalienability lurks the speaker's painful realization of having lost his access to God. Characteristically, this estrangement from the divine source of hope and sustenance is also presented in the realm of language: the speaker has neither the proper words to address God, nor any clear idea of which God he should even approach: "*YHVH betn, tsi Yeshue? Tsi dem fremdn gor Allah?*" (To pray to Jehovah or to Jesus? Or perhaps to the wholly foreign Allah?).[118] The use of the Tetragrammaton—unthinkable in traditional Jewish context—and the placement of the Jewish God next to Jesus and Allah, are the poem's strongest indication of the speaker's cultural confusion and spiritual isolation. When in a later stanza, there is an allusion to yet another foreign religion, it is hardly a surprise: "*Ikh varf zikh in di orems dayne, eyntsike, fargliverte nirvana!*" (I throw myself into your arms, unique and frozen [rigid] nirvana!).[119] The Buddhist notion of nirvana completes the poem's catalog of world religions, and, while it does not restore the speaker's ability to pray, it does hint at his only remaining hope, which, sadly, is nothing other than death and the peace it brings with it.

Significantly, the speaker's inability to pray is presented not as a uniquely individual problem but rather as an unmistakable sign of the modern condition: "*s'iz yeder tfile dokh*

[115] Ibid., I:5.

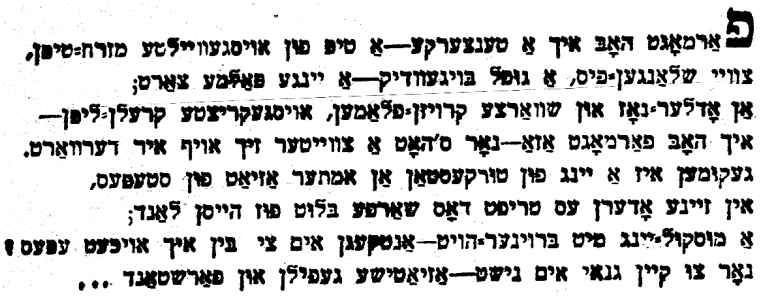
[116] Ibid., I:13.

[117] Ibid., I:14.

[118] Ibid., 25.

[119] Ibid., 30.

farshvundn funem mentshns lefts" (every prayer has disappeared from people's lips).[120] Yet, paradoxically, this poem's dominant theme is Jewish exclusivity. Indeed, it is precisely the poem's overwhelming pessimism that fixes the ideal Jewish identity within an East European context. While for Eynhorn, Asch, and many other Yiddish writers, the theme of Jews' Eastern origins presents a creative opportunity for expansion, liberation, and synthesis, Zilbershteyn's denial of any hope in modern life and in any land found through travel renders the speaker's native Galicia the only place to be presented favorably in his poem. Thus, both the speaker's former lover and the man to whom he lost her are associated with the East or Asia:


פֿאַרמאָגט האָב איך אַ טענצערקע—אַ טיפּ פֿון אויסגעוויילטע מזרח־טיפּן,
צוויי שלאַנגען־פֿיס, אַ גופּל בויגעוודיק—אַ ייִנגע פּאַלמע צאַרט;
אַן אָדלער־נאָז און שוואַרצע קרויזן־פּלאָמבן, אויסגעקריצטע קרעלן־לימפֿן—
איך האָב פֿאַרמאָגט אַזאַ—נאָר ס׳האָט אַ צווייטער זיך אויף איר דערוואַרט.
געקומען איז אַ ייִנג פֿון טורקעסטאַן אַן אמתער אַזיאַט פֿון סטעפּעס,
אין זיינע אָדערן עס טריפֿט דאָס שארפּע בלוט פֿון הייסן לאַנד;
אַ כוסקל־ייִנג מיט ברוינער־הויט—אַנטקעגן אים צי בין איך אויכעט עפּעס?
נאָר צו קיין גנאי אים נישט—אַזיאַטישע געפֿילן און פֿאַרשטאַנד ...[121]

I had a dancer—a choice one of the Eastern type,
two snake-like legs, a flexible little body—a young tender palm tree;
an aquiline nose and black fiery curls, lips like carved corals—
I had such a one—but another man was waiting for her.
He came—a youth from Turkestan, a true Asian from the steppes,
The sharp blood of his hot land flowing in his veins;
A muscular youth with brown skin—am I anything at all next to him?
But, no offense, his feelings and reason are Asian . . . (ellipsis in original)

The final reference to the man's "*azyatishe gefiln un farshtand*" (Asian feelings and understanding) is strikingly atypical of the Yiddish discourse of travel, in which certain Asian features are ascribed to Jews. Moreover, given the Orientalist tendency to eroticize and feminize the East, it is exceedingly rare for it to be presented as the site of male sexual superiority. The

[120] Ibid., II:2.

[121] Ibid., (36).

exceptionality of Zilbershteyn's work in this regard serves to confirm the general rule of Yiddish literature of travel, both fictional and non-fictional, namely that the disavowal of romanticizing and aestheticizing the non-Jewish world, of identifying a universal Jewish mission, or of exploring the Jews' non-European origins was possible only in works of utter pessimism and extreme morbidity.

Rather than producing a cultural synthesis, Zilbershteyn's poem expresses a synthesis of *sickness* and *pain*, seen in the speaker's attempt to find suitable Jewish imagery for depicting his medical condition. He dissects, as it were, the word *psoryasis* (psoriasis) and discovers that its internal structure connects it with the Jewish knife for the ritual slaughter of animals: "*psoryasis—a drayzilbik vort vi tempe shtsherbes fun an altn khalef*" (psoriasis—a three-syllable word like the dull notches of an old *khalef* [a ritual slaughterer's knife]).[122] This metaphor's dark connotations are obvious: if the disease is the old dull *khalef*, then the patient is the animal to be slaughtered, slowly and painfully.

Zilbershteyn's medicalized image of physical and spiritual degeneration may be deeply personal and idiosyncratic; however, the general notion of East European Jewry's unhealthy condition was an essential part of the cultural discourse during the interwar period, specifically with regard to the impulse for leaving Europe. The imagery of mental illness and incarceration found in *Sankt-Helene-indzl* had parallels in the profusion of texts concerned with the immense wave of emigration. Resulting above all from the traumatic events of World War I and the great economic and political instability in its aftermath, the eagerness with which masses of Jews, in particular those in Poland and the Baltic states, were prepared to seek a better life in even the farthest corners of the earth, became a popular subject of discussion in the Yiddish press and was

[122] Ibid., 20.

often treated as a pathology. "*A min spetsyele vander-krankeyt*" (some special wandering disease) was the appellation proposed in 1920 by A. S. Lirik for this phenomenon.[123] *"A min modne psikhoze hot arumgenumen dem yidishn folk*" (Some kind of a strange psychosis has seized the Jewish people), lamented A. Zeyf in a 1922 issue of a Kaunas Yiddish newspaper, blaming it on "*der tayvlonisher milkhome-vakkhanalye*" (the demonic war bacchanalia) and "*der itstiker shturem-un-drang-tsayt*" (the current Sturm und Drang period).[124]

Unlike in the writings of Zilbershteyn, Eynhorn, and other authors of poetry and fiction, including those with clearly autobiographical elements, these "psychoanalytic" articles attempt a straightforward analysis of a specific social phenomenon. As such, they shed light on the social climate in which Yiddish travel literature developed and which could not but have a vital bearing on its character, scope, and function. The two articles propose the same clear diagnosis, yet their medical approach stops there—neither offers a remedy or treatment plan. As Lirik explains that "*es iz tsu veynen un tsu lakhn tsuzamen, ven men kukt zikh tsu tsu der doziker umgliklekher mase vanderer, velkhe es hot arumgekhapt a min spetsyele vander-krankeyt af velkhe es gibt faloyfik keyn refue nisht*" (it makes one at once cry and laugh when one looks at this miserable wave of migrants, who have been seized by some kind of special wandering disease for which no cure exists as of yet). As if confirming the Jewish wanderers' stubborn insistence on leaving, a large advertisement for a ship company appears on the same page as Zeyf's piece, promising quick and comfortable journeys to such diverse destinations as Antwerp, New York, Lapland, and Manchuria.

[123] A. S. Lirik, "Der vander-shturm," *Haynt* (October 15, 1920): 5.

[124] A. Zeyf, "Di yidishe vander-psikhoze," *Der emigrant* no. 12 (August 4, 1922): 3–4.

Zeyf's article, in particular, is notable for his harsh tone in discussing the "psychotic" state of the Jewish mind.[125] It is not the notion of emigration per se that Zeyf finds a matter of concern. Rather, it is the random and indiscriminate nature of the masses' emigration aspirations: "*Der shetekh shpilt do nisht keyn role. A yid hot geveynlekh a breyte fantazye, un der veg keyn Keyptaun, oder Buenos-Ayres, dukht zikh im grod azoy noent, vi fun Oshentshin keyn Brisk*…." (The territory plays no role here. Jews are usually endowed with good power of imagination, and the way to Cape Town or Buenos Aires appears to them just as short as from Oszencin to Brisk . . .) The obsessive nature of these fantasies is what the article's author finds deeply worrisome, claiming that whenever two Jews in Poland meet, whether "shoemaker, tailor, or merchant," the conversation invariably turns to the question of "*vu s'lebt zikh beser, tsi in Berlin tsi Pariz, tsi in Argentine, tsi in Meksike*" (where life is better, in Berlin or in Paris, Argentina, or Mexico). According to the article, not only is this way of thinking unrealistic and dangerous but, in its fixation on a single object, it is also extremely unhealthy. Expressed in psychiatric terms, the condition Zeyf describes is akin to compulsive overeating: "*es iz do in meshugoim-hoyz aza min meshugas, ba velkher der meshugener farlirt dem khush far zatkeyt; er est un est on oyfher un veyst nisht ven er vert zat*" (there are patients in insane asylums, who lose the sense of fullness and begin eating incessantly without knowing when they are no longer hungry). The article overflows with metaphors, references, and allusions, as if employing every possible means in a desperate attempt to convey the urgency of the situation.

It is worth noting that Zeyf was writing only a year after the passing of the 1921 Emergency Quota Act, which introduced restrictions to immigration to the United States and led to a drastic reduction in the number of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. This new

[125] Ibid.

legislation, soon superseded by the stricter Immigration Act of 1924, was a turning point in the history of Jewish emigration and that resulted in its geographic "diversification." It was also a turning point for Yiddish travel literature, since it increased the demand for information about the rest of the world as new Jewish communities came to be established in places previously beyond the bounds of the Jewish "world map." Hence, Zeyf's article includes a variety of geographic names and makes specific reference to the new immigration rules: "*Hot ir nisht bamerkt mit velkher laykhtkeyt a yidisher emigrant, d.h. a yid, velkher hot zikh genumen in kop arayn tsu vandern, bashlist tsu forn keyn Argentine, Kube, Kanade, Meksike oder gor keyn Afrike, ven m'lozt im nisht arayn keyn Amerike?*" (Haven't you noticed with what ease a Jewish emigrant, that is a Jew who got the idea in his head to wander, decides to go to Argentina, Cubam, Canada, Mexico or else Africa, now that America is no longer open?).[126] It is in this context that one can appreciate the profusion of articles such as the one about the Jewish woman in Penang discussed at the beginning of the present chapter. In an atmosphere of "*vander-psikhoze*," distance lost its divisive power. "*Vegn a bruder . . . in Detroyt, in Rio-de-Zhaneyro, oder gor in Melburn*" (About a brother . . . in Detroit, in Rio de Janeiro, or else in Melbourne), writes Zeyf, "*redt men punkt azoy, vi vegn a korev mit velkhn men ken zikh oft durkhreydn!*" (one speaks just as if it were a relative with whom one can chat regularly!). In fact, a Jew in Poland had no means of speaking to a relative in any of those places, as telephone service over such long distances did not yet exist. The lack of spatial awareness raised in the article is a correlate of the sense of homelessness, by which one might feel potentially at home anywhere in the world. The more intense their feelings of homelessness, the more "*farlorn dem gloybn in dem vider-oyfboy fun zeyere tseshterte heymen*" (they stopped believing that their destroyed homes would ever be

[126] Ibid.

rebuilt)—and the more tempting, natural, and emotionally necessary it was for them to imagine life in other places.

Zeyf's article has much in common with Lirik's; indeed, it is likely that the former borrowed ideas and images from the latter. Yet, while neither offers a solution to the problem that they have identified, their final messages are profoundly different. Zeyf's passionate discourse on emigration—published, appropriately, in the newspaper called *Der emigrant*—is a journalistic counterpart of Zilbershteyn's morbid poem in that it extends the vision of pathology from a single person to the entire East European Jewry. Both Zilbershteyn and Zeyf raise the subject of physical and cultural homelessness, whether it results from dissolution or the ravages of war. Both speak of wasted time: through the blind pursuit of pleasure, the ensuing disease, and hospital confinement, in Zilbershteyn's poem; or from the protracted process of emigration, spent in endless wait at immigration offices and money exchange counters, in Zeyf's article. The texts share a profound pessimism in their firm resistance to glorifying the Jewish wandering; neither offers a positive interpretation of present suffering; neither suggests there may be a deeper meaning to the present pain. Zeyf, furthermore, goes beyond simply bemoaning the Jews' emotional and geographic confusion and actively advises potential emigrants against leaving—a deeply problematic position, especially when seen from the vantage of history. He is ready to accept the necessity to flee "*fun dem shreklekhn koshmar fun blut un umoyfherlekhe redifes*" (from the horrible nightmare of blood and endless persecutions), but now that the world war is over, why should those "*velkhe lebn vi es iz ruik ba zikh in shtetl*" (who are living more or less peacefully in their *shtetlekh*) exchange their native environment for the unknown? He tells the story of a young man he met in Danzig, who had been repeatedly denied entry to the United States, and, after spending some time in Mexico, returned to Europe, still intent on trying his

luck in America again at the earliest opportunity. Zeyf's question "*far vos?*" (why?) strikes the young man as pointless: "*Staytsh, vos far a kashe, men muz dokh ergets forn!*" (Come, what kind of questions is this? One has to travel somewhere!). It takes Zeyf considerable time and effort to convince this indefatigable wanderer that it is unnecessary to roam the world and that one can simply stay *at home*.

Lirik, on the other hand, offers an interpretation of the "wander psychosis" that is strongly reminiscent of the Ahasuerus character in Eynhorn's novella. After describing the obsession with emigration and the associated hardships—both giving rise to and resulting from it—Lirik gradually introduces a more positive theme: the Jewish people's creative potential. He admits that in the final account he is left with not "*keyn epl fun fartsveyflung un pesimizm, nor farkert, men heybt on tsu gleybn, az fun di dozike umgliklekhe momentn vet aroysshprotsn epes a nayer koyekh, efsher afile a shafnde kraft*" (the apple of doubt and pessimism, but rather one starts believing that from these unhappy moments will sprout some kind of new strength, perhaps even a creative power). Lirik's tone turns increasingly literary, as his panegyric on the potential of homelessness begins to exhibit certain Romantic tropes:

> *Es zenen faran momentn in lebn, ven di mentshn hobn shoyn kimat nit vos tsu farlirn, ven zey shteyen naket un orem, un dafke demolt zenen zey oft feik tsu groyse maysim. Oykh in yidishn lebn iz gekumen tsu azelkhe iberbrukhs-momentn, ven milyonen yidn blonken arum iber der velt on shum bodn unter di fis, frank un fray, vi di mame hot zey gehat, un dafke di dozike zeyere nisht-tsugebundnkeyt un hefker-lebn kon farvandlt vern in a shafungskraft, vos brekht moyern*.
>
> There are moments in life when people have nearly nothing to lose, when they are standing naked and poor, and it is precisely then that they are often capable of great deeds. In Jewish life, too, has come a time of such turning points when millions of Jews roam around the world, completely uprooted and penniless, with only the clothes on their back, and it is precisely their disconnectedness and unsettledness which can be transformed into a creative force that tears down walls.

This poetic style was typical of Lirik (the pseudonym of Arn-Levi Riklis), who began his journalistic career by writing on Russian and German literature. Described by his friends and colleagues as "*a geboyrener pesimist, a shvartszeer on a likhtikn shtral in lebn, . . . farbiterter, antoyshter alter bokher*" (a born pessimist, a negativist who saw not a single ray of light in life, . . . an embittered and disillusioned old bachelor), he often talked about his own literary talents, which he believed had been wasted on writing for newspapers.[127] These biographical facts shed additional light on his ideological and aesthetic choices, specifically with regard to the subject of emigration. It was Riklis's particular personality and poetic imagination that allowed him to see the creative energy behind the enormous demographic and geographic upheavals.

Like Eynhorn, Lirik turns to the romantic image of the lonely wanderer, whose very homelessness is key to his power, thus instantly elevating to a much higher cultural and spiritual level that which he calls "*a gemish fun menakhem-mendlshn bitokhn, naive fantazyes, lekherlekhkeyt, umglik un mut*" (a mixture of Menakhem-Mendl's faith, naive fantasies, ridiculousness, misfortune, and courage). His introduction of the subject of humor is significant as well: by mentioning the name of Sholem Aleichem's famous character, not only does he place the Jewish lack of strong practical foundations within the broader and older context of Yiddish literary creativity, but he also connects it with the general discourse of the absurdity of human life—which is yet another way of aestheticizing the specific Jewish case. In fact, toward the very end of the article, he no longer insists on its pathological nature, arguing that there is no way of knowing "*tsi iz di dozike umgehoyere vanderung a gezunte ershaynung, oder neyn*" (whether this enormous [wave of] wandering is a healthy phenomenon). Finally, Riklis follows Eynhorn in the attention he pays to the Jews' ancient history, essentially concurring with Ahasuerus regarding

[127] Khaim Finklshteyn, *Haynt: a tsaytung bay yidn, 1908-1939* (Tel Aviv: I. L. Peretz, 1978), 186.

the creative genius and unstoppable energy that the Jewish people have demonstrated throughout history: "*Mir zenen dokh epes a merkvirdik folk, vos vert geboyt fun katastrofn un kumt aroys banayt un gekreftitkt nokh yedn groysn umglik*" (Are we not a remarkable people—built by catastrophes and coming out refreshed and strengthened after each disaster?).[128] In retrospect, it may be tempting to speak of Zeyf's political shortsightedness while praising Lirik's ability to see the promise of regeneration in the Jewish masses' "globalist" impulse. Yet for both, as was true for other writers of the Yiddish press in the interwar period, the discussion of foreign destinations was motivated not by a trivial touristic impulse but by a profound concern for matters of physical and cultural life and death.

The diverse texts examined in this chapter testify to the peculiar role that geographic knowledge, curiosity and imagination played in Yiddish culture in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Rooted in the traditional notions of *goles*, the swift proliferation of themes related to travel and foreignness in Yiddish literature in the 1900s and the subsequent rise of modern Yiddish travel writing were fueled by the specific conditions of Jewish life during that period. Thus, old Jewish themes were combined with the latest pressures and impulses linked to the sense of alienation and confusion resulting from the breaking down of traditional social structures and religious foundations. The profound political crises, both those specifically pertinent to Jews and those affecting society at large, including the increasingly complicated and precarious state of Western colonialism, were also important factors shaping Yiddish travel literature.

A key trait of the modern Yiddish travelogue is its predominantly *negative* character. In contrast to, say, the British or French travel writing of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Yiddish

[128] Lirik, "Der vander-shturm."

writer's impressions of foreign places tended to be dominated by themes of tension, vulnerability and often outright suffering. This tendency is clearly discernible in a wide variety of genres, ranging from prose and poetry to popular journalism. The work of the exceptionally prolific Peretz Hirschbein, analyzed extensively in the next chapter, embodies many of the same tendencies that have been discussed as part of this chapter's examination of Yiddish travelogues' engagement with the Other and the Self. Hirschbein's take on the Jewish personal and collective "wandering psychosis" shares elements with Asch's attempts to locate his identity between the familiar West and the exotic and eroticized East, Eynhorn's romanticized vision of the Jewish people's destiny, the discourse on colonialism in the popular Yiddish press, and the pseudo-medicalized discussions of the Jewish psyche's "abnormality." What sets Hirschbein apart, however, is the particularly complex way in which these diverse themes combine in his work to propose a compelling vision of human existence, which both affirms and at the same time harshly condemns the preeminence of wandering in Jewish life.

Chapter 2.

"The Prince of Silence": Peretz Hirschbein and His Search for Peace

There are several important moments in Yiddish cultural history that together mark a gradual transition into "modernity" and toward the development of "modern Yiddish culture." These include the rise of the Haskalah in eighteenth-century Germany; the spread of maskilic ideas into the eastern regions of the Yiddish-speaking world in the nineteenth century and the emergence of the Yiddish novel in the 1860s; the mass emigration between the early 1880s and the outbreak of World War I; and the rapid development of the Yiddish press and education in the first decade of the twentieth century. While critically important to the present discussion, this historical timeline does not, however, explain the ideological substance of the notion of "modernity." A closer look at the prevailing discourse among Yiddish cultural institutions and scholars who sought to embrace Jewish language and culture while adapting to modern European life reveals a consistent emphasis on and preference for elements of the Yiddish cultural universe that were largely informed by the ideas of secular and universalist socialism.

The idea of creating a literary tradition in Yiddish comparable to those of major European languages grew above all out of the maskilic impulse for integration. "*Heye odom betseyskho vihudi beoholekho*" (Be a human when you go outside and a Jew at home), wrote the famous Russian maskil Yehuda Leib Gordon in 1863. By the dawn of World War I, this principle had been embraced by a large portion of Russian Jewry, whose process of integration and assimilation exhibited a much greater preference for the first half of Gordon's exhortation. The challenge of being "*odom betseysekho*," while still regularly transforming into "*vihudi beoholekho*," was far from easy. Once distanced from the strict boundaries of the traditional

Jewish lifestyle, the line beyond which one could no longer be considered an active participant in Jewish culture became difficult to discern. Indeed, religious opponents of the Haskalah liked to point out that many descendants of its leader Moses Mendelssohn converted to Christianity. In Germany, the society's relative tolerance of religious difference and the linguistic closeness of Yiddish and German were instrumental in easing Jews' swift integration, and extensive assimilation, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The situation of the Ostjuden (East European Jews) was quite different—politically, culturally, and linguistically. Naturally, in the case of Yiddish speakers, the language served as a powerful delineator of authenticity. Simply by continuing to speak and write in Yiddish, one could claim a rightful place within Jewish culture; those whose desire for integration included the rejection of Yiddish were condemned as "assimilationists."

While maintaining linguistic distinction was inherent for any speaker of Yiddish, it was much harder for a proponent of modern Yiddish culture to preserve its religious aspect. First, there was the practical "inconvenience" of religious observance for someone eager to attend European universities, expand business connections, and engage in other activities aimed at self-fulfillment in the wider society. There was also a much deeper problem, namely that the very essence of traditional Judaism postulated a life apart, epitomized in such concepts as *lehavdl* (separating the holy from the mundane or the impure), *derekh-hashas* (the path of the Talmud), and *ato-bokhartonu* (You have chosen us), and expressed in countless inherent features of the Yiddish language. The rise of modern Yiddish culture is often compared to the cultural movements of other European minorities, such as the Czechs and the Ukrainians. Yet none of those emerging nations faced the same internal conflicts as in the Jewish case, which involved language and folklore in addition to a cultural and spiritual basis predicated on the notion of

chosenness and separateness. Therein lay one of the central paradoxes and contradictions of Yiddish culture, which are felt in the Jewish world today.

For Jewish intellectuals who sought to define a form of Jewish culture that was consistent with European modernity, to remain within the Jewish religious framework ran contrary to the desire for integration and proved largely incompatible with the kind of active artistic creation that could engage with the ideas and "standards" of European artists, writers, and intellectuals. What ideology could then replace the religious core? Or rather, how could the religious core be transformed in order to serve the purposes of the new cultural era? One answer came from Y. L. Peretz: embrace and cherish Jewish tradition from a secular standpoint. The tremendous influence of his literary works and speeches testified to the Jewish intelligentsia's strong need for cultural synthesis.

Yet even the solution proposed by Peretz could only partially satisfy Jewish youth in search of meaning and purpose. The appalling political and economic situation, coupled with the deeply ingrained notion of messianic redemption, contributed to the speedy rise of Jewish political movements. The most popular political ideologies (i.e., Zionism, Bundist socialism, and communism) were, in fact, closely related in their emphasis on social equality, communality, and—in the case of communism, rather aggressive—secularism. These ideologies may be considered as existing along a continuum: from the Zionist goal of establishing a Hebrew-speaking Jewish homeland in Palestine to the communist repudiation of all nationalism and religion. The former demanded jettisoning Yiddish and, to a large extent, embracing the spirit of separateness that had been the primary target of the maskilic attack. In spite of its separatist aims, Zionism was also often interpreted as a path for *normalizing* Jews, one that would create parity with other ethno-cultural groups by establishing a nation with its own language, culture, and

territory. Yet, given that throughout the many centuries of exile (*goles*), the yearning for Erets-Yisroel (the Land of Israel) had been so tightly intertwined with the ideas and rituals of Judaism, it was nearly impossible to completely separate the two.

As a consequence, many Yiddish intellectuals felt estranged from Zionism—both on account of its language policy and what they perceived as its exclusionist nationalism. Communism was likewise considered too exclusionary. Its association with the repressive Bolshevik regime and its active persecution, rather then mere criticism or rejection, of religion were factors that severely limited its scope, variety, and continuance. By far the most fertile ground for the development of modern Yiddish culture was the terrain in between. In this middle ground—that is, the various forms of Yiddishist socialism—the majority of the authors discussed in the present dissertation found their somewhat uneasy ideological home. For Yiddish intellectuals influenced by socialism, Yiddishism, European humanism, and the cultural holism promoted by Peretz, the task of negotiating between the universalist and the national was of paramount importance and difficulty. Yiddish travel literature, given the genre's inherent concern with home and destination, self and Other, became one of the most productive forms for expressing, debating, and making sense of these struggles. Yiddish travelogues are dominated by paradoxes, inconsistencies, and the constant search for a solution to the apparent contradiction of remaining a Jewish writer while rejecting Judaism.

These complex issues lie at the center of the travel accounts by Peretz Hirschbein (1880?–1948), whose traveler persona, as expressed in his writing and his contemporaries' observations, was characterized by a notable inconsistency: it was at once supremely suited for

work in this particular genre and yet antagonistic to the very notion of travel. [129] A loner and a skeptic, Hirschbein was powerfully drawn to nature and peace and lamented the worldwide dispersal of the Jewish people. And yet some mysterious force propelled him to travel to the farthest corners of the world in search of something that could probably never be attained. Some of his most characteristic qualities were reflected in his favorite hobby as an amateur researcher of spiders.[130] According to a Soviet writer whom he met in Japan, Hirschbein made the following admission: "In addition to my novellas and plays, for the last twenty years I've been working on a book about spiders—their social life, intelligence, and specificities. I know over three thousand species of spiders. Wherever I happen to be—whether here, in Australia, or in Argentina—I search for spiders, observe them, and take notes."[131] While spiders are commonly associated with ruthlessness, insidiousness, and gloominess—as exemplified by Dostoevsky's famous depiction in *Crime and Punishment* of hell as a bathhouse filled with spiders—they did not carry such negative connotations for Hirschbein. Instead, in addition to being linked to his immense affection for nature, Hirschbein's arachnological activities were part of the characteristic mixture of introspection and power of observation that defined much of his travel writing. Thus, a more relevant image in his case would be a lone spider in its nearly invisible web, communicating an almost mystical level of awareness of itself and its surroundings. Aware and observant, but *different* and somewhat detached from other people—such was Hirschbein, the melancholy

[129] There is disagreement among different sources regarding Hirschbein's date of birth. Hirschbein's United States passport (issued in 1920) gives November 19, 1879; Reyzen's *Leksikon* (1928)—1880; Niger and Shatski's *Leksikon* (1956-1981)—November 7, 1880; and Zilbertsvayg's *Leksikon* (1931)—November 26, 1881.

[130] Meylekh Ravitch, *Mayn leksikon: yidishe shraybers, kinstlers, aktyorn, oykh klal-tuers in di Amerikes un andere lender*, vol. 4 (book 1) (Tel Aviv: Veltrat far yidish un yidisher kultur, 1980), 203.

[131] Boris Pilniak, "Olenii gorod Nara," in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 6 vols. (Moscow: Terra, 2003), 352 – 359. All translations from Russian are my own.

wanderer speaking to his readers of his endless journeys, which took decades to accomplish and thousands of pages to describe.

Indeed, the notion of *difference* is central to travel not only because it exposes the traveler to unfamiliar places and people. The traveler status implies a separation from one's native community and thus, in a certain sense, being different even in one's own environment. In view of Hirschbein's pioneering role in the development of the introspective Yiddish travelogue, it is no coincidence that from his first beginnings in Yiddish literature, he was perceived as exceptional. Peretz Hirschbein "*hot ongehoybn andersh vi di yidishe shrayber fun zayn dor*" (started out differently from the other Yiddish writers of his generation), asserted one of the countless biographic sketches about him.[132] Unlike most of his fellow Yiddish authors, who grew up in the city or a shtetl, Hirschbein was raised on a farm. This affinity for life in the countryside was an important theme throughout his life and work, including his time as a farmer in the Catskills in the summer of 1912; his close contacts with and writings about Jewish farmers and settlers in Palestine, the Crimea, and Argentina; and his most famous play, *Grine felder* (Green Fields; 1918), whose 1937 film adaptation became one of the most commercially successful Yiddish films.

Hirschbein's friends became aware of his passion for travel as early as 1911, while he was still living in Russia, when he undertook an eight-week raft expedition on the Dnieper, accompanied by his friend writer Mendl Elkin.[133] Later that year, Hirschbein arrived in New York, where his career as a world traveler began in earnest. In 1914, he made a prolonged visit to South America; in the early 1920s he embarked on a two-year journey, which included Australia,

[132] "Perets Hirshbeyn," *Dos naye vort* no. 133 (March 1932): 10.

[133] *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* (New York: Alveltlekher kultur-kongres, 1956), "Hirshbeyn, Perets," p. 151.

Oceania, and South Africa. From 1925 to late 1929, he traveled continuously, with a complicated itinerary spanning China, Burma, India, Japan, Palestine, Soviet Russia, Eastern Europe, and South America. Hirschbein met his future wife, the Yiddish poet Esther Shumiatcher, in 1918 while visiting Calgary, Canada and married her that same year. Matrimony did not end his peregrinations, however, and it was not until 1934 that the couple had their first and only child and "settled down," living first in New York and, for the last eight years of Hirschbein's life, in Los Angeles.

Hirschbein's itinerant lifestyle was predicated on his difference in other respects. It took tremendous discipline, willpower, personal connections, and financial means to become "*'der eybiker vanderer' fun der yidisher literatur*" ("the perpetual wanderer" of Yiddish literature).[134] This was beyond the means of the majority of Yiddish writers: they lacked financial resources but had obligations in abundance—families, homes, and professional and social responsibilities—whether in New York, Warsaw, Vilna, or elsewhere. At a time when the era of transoceanic mass tourism was still decades away and while Jews across Eastern Europe weighed the question of emigration throughout the interwar period, Hirschbein was among the few Jews who were able to leave home with the sole purpose of seeing other countries and cultures.

In a letter to Hirschbein, the well-known Yiddish literary critic Shmuel Niger bemoans his own life's "*fardreytkeyt un umzinikeyt*" (confusion and senselessness) and expresses a mixture of admiration and jealousy for Hirschbein's lifestyle: "*[I]r zayt a frayer mentsh. Di velt iz ayere. Ir bavegt zikh in ir loyt ayer eygenem viln. Efsher dukht zikh es mir. Ober epes iz gevis*

[134] L. Blumenfeld, "Perets Hirshbeyn in Pariz," *Der moment* (October 2, 1927): 3.

do in der laykhtkeyt mit velkher ir nemt dem shtekn in hant un lozt zikh iber der velt."[135] ([Y]ou are a free person. The world is yours. You move in it at your own will. Perhaps it only seems to me that way, but there must be something in the ease with which you take a staff in your hand and set out into the world.") Niger's image of a "*frayer mentsh*" (free person) with "*dem shtekn*" (walking stick) is reminiscent of the wanderers, emigrants, and refugees that appear in countless Yiddish texts: from Abramovitsh's "*torbe-shlepers*" (sack carriers) to Manger's poetic persona of "*a farvoglter prints*" (a lost prince) "*mit eyn por shikh, eyn hemd afn layb, in der hant dem shtekn*" (with one pair of shoes, one shirt on the body, and a stick in the hand).[136] Yet in Hirschbein's case, neither poverty nor persecution impelled his journeys. Accordingly, Hirschbein's travelogues contain numerous descriptions of Jewish émigrés' surprise at his unconventional and voluntary travel: "*Vi kumt es aher a mentsh bloyz a kuk tsu gebn?*" (How can a person come here just to take a look?), wondered many in the South African Lithuanian Jewish community.[137] Several factors made the Hirschbein phenomenon possible: the considerable revenue from the production of his highly successful plays, the constant demand for his journalism and speaking engagements, and his emotional and physical resilience and independence.

Hirschbein's United States passport, preserved among his personal papers, bears testimony to its owner's remarkable career as a literary traveler.[138] As was the State Department's official practice at the time, the passport was "valid for use only in the following

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[135] Shmuel Niger, Letter to Peretz Hirschbein (Jul 28, 1926), PPH (Folder 28).

[136] Itzik Manger, *Lid Un Balade*.

[137] Peretz Hirschbein, *Arum der velt (rayze-ayndrukn): 1920-1922* (New York: Literatur, 1927), 113.

[138] Peretz Hirschbein, United States passport (issued Aug 24, 1920), PPH (Folder 317).

countries and for objects specified." Hirschbein's travels of the early 1920s, described in his widely read regular newspaper pieces and subsequently collected in a single volume, are presented in his passport through concise bureaucratic formulas. Of particular interest is the official designation of the main purpose of his trips: "Literary Work." The notion of traversing such vast distances for the sole purpose of seeking literary inspiration was redolent more of an English aristocrat's leisured indulgence of curiosity, backed by personal wealth and the British Empire's colonial power—less so the professional activities of a Yiddish writer. Hirschbein's creative pursuits as an amateur watercolorist and pianist further reinforced his "aristocrat" persona. Further, in his avid study of spiders, he was not dissimilar from the writer Vladimir Nabokov—a scion of one of Tsarist Russia's most prominent families—who traveled the world chasing butterflies.

Hirschbein's privileged status and his worldwide connections had important implications both for his own perception of his mission and for other people's expectations of him. One of the most characteristic arguments Hirschbein employed to encourage Ravitch to travel was linked to a particular vision of Yiddish literature: "*a mentsh darf forn iber der velt—a yidisher shrayber avade*" (a person must travel around the world, let alone a Yiddish writer).[139] Far from viewing travel as a mere pastime, Hirschbein treated it in part as a moral responsibility. The conflict and tension between his longing for peaceful rural existence and his voluntary role as a worldwide ambassador of Yiddish culture and champion of Jewish cultural and moral health lay at the heart of Hirschbein's characteristic mixture of melancholy and determination.

Hirschbein embraced Yiddish travel literature's centuries-old theme of the Jewish worldwide dispersion and adapted it to the contemporary situation. Unlike his nineteenth-century

[139] Ravitch, *Mayn leksikon: yidishe shraybers, kinstlers, aktyorn, oykh klal-tuers in di Amerikes un andere lender*, 4 (book 1):202.

predecessor "Benjamin the Second," Hirschbein was not addressing potential European benefactors and interceders on behalf of the remote Jewish communities suffering from poverty and persecution. Rather, his primary addressee was a person akin to himself: a modern *inteligent* (educated person) touched by the profound transformations in the Jewish world and searching for answers to fundamental human questions. He repeatedly stressed the symbolic significance of his visits for Jews who, living in relatively new communities, felt culturally isolated. "*Afrike iz shoyn mer nisht keyn vayte medine*" (Africa is no longer a faraway land), reported Hirschbein, emphasizing the joy and pride that his appearance evoked in the Yiddish-speaking intelligentsia of Durban. "*A yidisher shrayber ken shoyn aher farblondzhen. Mir veysn ver er iz*."[140] (Even a Yiddish writer can wander in here). Nonetheless, he made it clear that the arrival of a "writer" was often seen as a hopeful sign from a general and pragmatic point of view rather than from a specifically cultural one. Hirschbein's description of the Jewish farmers in Montefiore—at the time Argentina's newest Jewish agricultural colony—makes evident that literature and theater were hardly primary concens for the new immigrants, given the enormous practical difficulties they faced in their new environment: "*Oy vey, ven ir zolt es arumshraybn undzere tsores, efsher volt di velt derfun khotsh gevust*" (Woe is to us! Perhaps, were you to describe our plight, the world would at least know about us).[141]

Schools and cultural institutions, committees, and individual writers and artists sought Hirschbein's advice and assistance. His archive contains grateful letters from Jewish education officials in Poland; his publications had, according to one letter, "*an umgehoyere badaytung*" (an

[140] Hirschbein, *Arum der velt (rayze-ayndrukn): 1920-1922*, 113.

[141] Hirschbein, *Fun vayte lender: Argentine, Brazil; yuni-november 1914*, 109.

enormous significance) in drawing American Jewry's attention to their bitter plight.[142] Yiddish cultural institutions often found themselves in desperate situations during the "*tkufe fun permanente kabtsonim-nitsrokhim*" (period of permanent beggars), as the prominent literary critic Nakhmen Mayzil, half in jest, called the interwar period in a letter to Hirschbein. At the time the editor-in-chief of Poland's most important Yiddish literary periodical, *Literarishe bleter*, Mayzil does not spare emotional urgency in his plea for ideas about finding financial support in America: "*Kluge, tayere mentshn—git an eytse!!!!!*" (Smart dear people, advise!!!!!).[143] Mayzil's note, with its five exclamation marks, is a "screaming" testimony to the socioeconomic divide between the two Yiddish cultural worlds on opposite sides of the Atlantic. Even artist Marc Chagall, who had just arrived in Berlin after being trapped in Soviet Russia during World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, sent Hirschbein a deeply personal letter, describing his predicament in terms suggestive of an intimate conversation between two creative people: "*Задыхаюсь от отсутствия воздуха[,] мне нужно движение и движение*" (I am getting suffocated because of the lack of air; I need constant movement).[144] Writing in Russian, even though he was also fluent in Yiddish, Chagall mentions that both Hirschbein and Sholem Asch had promised to help him organize exhibits of his art in the United States and implores Hirschbein to put him in touch with American art galleries.

Because of his lifestyle, Hirschbein was able to maintain close relationships with Yiddish cultural figures in both Europe and the Americas. His visits to important Yiddish centers such as Warsaw were marked by literary evenings and informal gatherings in his honor. These events

[142] Yidishe shul-organizatsye, Letter to Peretz Hirschbein (Dec 5, 1920), PPH (Folder 20).

[143] Nakhmen Mayzil, Letter to Peretz Hirschbein and Ester Shumiatcher (Jun 12, 1935), PPH (Folder 26).

[144] Marc Chagall, Letter to Peretz Hirschbein (1923?), PPH (Folder 42).

were considered important enough to impel apologies from absentees, as was the case with the influential Yiddish linguist, writer, and journalist Noah Prylucki, who, upon failing to attend a farewell meeting with Hirschbein at the Yiddish Writers Union in Warsaw, sent a letter explaining that he had returned from Vilna with a bad cold.[145] Hirschbein thus positioned himself as someone who was both a *folksmentsh* trusted by *poshete yidn* (ordinary Jews, the Jewish masses) and an *inteligent* respected by leading cultural figures, and who, moreover, was capable of finding a common language with non-Jews, the latter ability owing less to his command of several languages, including Russian and French, than to his universalist humanist outlook.

It would be a gross mischaracterization to view Hirschbein's cultural identity as monolithic. In fact, his travelogues reveal several distinct cultural faces, each with its own notions of home and homelessness. To the extent that he had a home, its location—during most of his travels—was in the United States. He was 31 years old when he first arrived in New York, and America gradually became an essential part of his identity. Thus, noticing American merchandise in the store windows on a central street in Sydney, he refers to it as "*undzere skhoyres*" (our merchandize), exhibiting a heightened awareness of the "*reklames mit der amerikaner shrayendikeyt*" (advertisements with American garishness) and the city's overall "*amerikaner ritm*" (American rhythm).[146] He was, however, above all a Jew. Thus, his first task upon arriving in South Africa is to find "*a yidishe heym*" (a Jewish home)—a desire that he presents as a general rule: "*Dos bagert dokh a yidisher rayznder in a vaytn veg. Der farlang mit*

[145] Noah Prylucki, Letter to Peretz Hirschbein (Oct 30, 1929), PPH (Folder 33).

[146] Hirschbein, *Arum der velt (rayze-ayndrukn): 1920-1922*, 75.

eygene zikh tsu bagegenen."[147] (After all, this is what a Jewish traveler desires on the long route. It is the desire to meet one's own.)

There is also a more specific dimension to his Jewishness: he is a *Russian* Jew and a *Yiddish* speaker. On his first day in Wellington, New Zealand, he finds an official phonebook and searches for Jewish-sounding names. He soon comes across a Jewish name preceded by "reverend" and concludes that the person must be a rabbi.[148] His assumption proves correct: the "reverend" turns out to be a German Jew who is happy to help a Jewish traveler. However, even though the rabbi, who has lived in New Zealand for a long time, receives him kindly, Hirschbein begins to feel uncomfortable: "*[H]ot vider der rusisher yid in mir gelitn. . . . Nishto ba zey keyn derekh-erets*." [149] ([T]he Russian Jew in me was once again suffering. . . . They [German Jews] have no respect.) His host's subtly haughty reactions to Hirschbein's questions about the local Russian-Jewish community suddenly made the Yiddish writer painfully conscious of the cultural divide between himself and this pedantically respectable German-Jewish "reverend."

Compare this with Hirschbein's reaction to finally finding the Jewish neighborhood of Buenos Aires on his first day in Argentina: his heart leaps with joy at the sight of posters announcing some of the trashiest plays in the Yiddish stage repertoire.

> א אידישער טעאטער־אנאנס אין א פענסטער פון א קליין גע־
> וועלבע! !
> וואס נאך האב איך בעדארפט? די אותיות פיערקאנטיגע
> מיט רויטען און שוואדצען טינט. מען מעלדט, אז דאָרטען און דאָר־
> טען שפיעלט די בערימטע... און אזוי ווייטער — היינט ביינאכט
> ב א ר ג מ י ר ד י י ן ו ו י י ב און מאָרגען — ז י י ן
> ו ו י י ב ס מ א ן.
> חכלל, איך בין **אין דער היים.** ווילנא, וואַרשע, ניו־יאָרק, שי־

[147] Ibid., 113.

[148] Ibid., 38.

[149] Ibid., 43.

קאגא — אַדער באברויסק — ס׳איז קיין אונטערשייד ניט. אין דער היים בין איך![150]

> A Yiddish theater poster in the window of a small store! What else did I need? The square letters in red and black ink. It is announced that tonight at a particular theater the famous…and so forth is playing *Lend Me Your Wife* tonight and *His Wife's Husband* tomorrow. In short, I feel at home: Vilna, Warsaw, Chicago, or Bobruisk, it makes no difference. I am home!

The irony here is unmistakable: Hirschbein was one of the leading figures in the new Yiddish theater, created as an alternative to the popular *shund* (trashy plays) suggested by the two titles in the passage. But this irony makes the sense of homecoming all the more powerful, since it suggests that what matters is not the culture's objective quality but rather the fact of its intimately familiarity as one's own.

A rare glimpse of how Hirschbein was perceived by the people he encountered during his travels is provided by an unlikely source: a Russian-language travelogue by Boris Pilniak (1894–1938), in which the Soviet writer describes meeting a "Mister G." in the Japanese city of Nara.[151] Few such accounts exist, especially outside of Yiddish literature. Even though Pilniak never mentions Hirschbein by his full name, his account contains abundant clues to his companion's identity. The non-Jewish and non-Yiddish-speaking Pilniak depicts Hirschbein as a figure simultaneously imposing and touching: "*Этот седой человек с бритым лицом философа, писатель и пророк этого рассеянного народа . . . этот человек, который бродит по миру от одного отеля к другому, который не имеет родственников и говорит на всех языках мира*" (This gray man with the shaved face of a philosopher; a writer and prophet of his scattered people . . . this man, who wanders around the world from one hotel to the next, has no

[150] Hirschbein, *Fun vayte lender: Argentine, Brazil; yuni-november 1914*, 42–43.

[151] Pilniak, "Olenii gorod Nara." Note that in Russian, the name "Hirschbein" is spelled with an initial "Г" ("G"). The Yiddish translation appeared in Boris Pilniak, "Di hirshn-shtot Nara: vi azoy B. Pilnyak hot farbrakht etlekhe teg in Yapan tsuzamen mit Perets Hirshbeyn," trans. ?, Vokhnshrift 2, no. 11 (61) (March 11, 1932): 6, 7.

relatives, and speaks every language). Pilniak's romantic portrait of a wanderer and prophet has strong biblical overtones and is also reminiscent of the Wandering Jew theme. Its components are selected with great precision to convey Hirschbein's characteristic mixture of Jewish specificity, humanist universalism, and personal exceptionality. The reference to "the shaved face of a philosopher" is also telling, for this detail stresses Hirschbein's *modern* image: if he represents a kind of Wandering Jew, it is a distinctly modern version, whose sophistication is a major part of its appeal.

Hirschbein's perception of the Jewish diaspora was dominated by his sense of moral duty, as if he had been sent on an official mission to survey Jewish life in new places of settlement. "*Ikh vander di letste yorn in di trit fun undzere vanderer in ilerley lender un batrakht zey in zeyere naye heymen*" (In recent years, I have been wandering in the footsteps of our wanderers around the world, and I have been observing them in their new homes), wrote Hirschbein, summarizing his project.[152] In his writing, he consistently warned of the main danger of emigration: the turning irrelevant of the old moral and cultural foundations, often without an adequate substitution. The inevitable results of this situation, according to Hirschbein, are the "*gaystike tsetumlenish*" (spiritual confusion) and "*naketkeyt*" (nakedness) of "*undzer folk Yisroel*" (our People of Israel).[153] The theme of nakedness is developed further in his examination of these issues in the medical terms of health and disease, which is also related to his general focus on nature. The immigrant is thus likened to a sick person, whose weakened immune system is incapable of withstanding the onslaught of harmful bacteria. The disorientation caused by the unfamiliar environment and the exhaustion from the daily struggle

[152] Peretz Hirschbein, "Tsnies un prostitutsye" (unpublished manuscript) (1926): 1, PPH.

[153] Peretz Hirschbein, "Religye un kultur" (unpublished manuscript) (1930s?): 1, PPH.

for existence result in immigrants' failure to learn the beneficial aspects of the new culture. In a state of weakness, they adopt instead the most dangerous and unseemly ones—a notion that he conveys through the metaphor of "*shvomen, vos vi nor men rayst zey fun der erd op, klaybn zikh verem in zey arayn*" (mushrooms—as soon as they are torn out of the ground, they become filled with worms).[154]

In Hirschbein's dark metaphor, sterility leads to disease and ensuing demise, with little hope of regeneration. "*Kh'hob zey getrofn in Argentine, Brazilye, Urugvay*" (I met them in Argentina, Brasil, Uruguay), writes Hirschbein, referring to the "*iluim, kinder fun di groyse yeshives in Rusland*" (child prodigies from the great yeshivas in Russia), whom America has reduced to the pitiable condition of menial laborer.[155] Hirschbein's conception of sterility is more than metaphorical: he describes these young men as "*nit keyn bavaybte, frukhtloze un fun alts opgerisn*" (single, barren, and completely uprooted).[156] Despite his many reservations about the traditional Jewish lifestyle in Eastern Europe, Hirschbein finds it painful to observe the dejection of a Jewish peddler selling "*kendi un tsaytungen, . . . kneplekh un bershtlekh*" (candy and newspapers, . . . buttons and hairbrushes) in a Pullman car, contrasted with the cultural richness and confidence of "*bney-toyre mit smikhes af rabones un kandidatn af raykhe kales mit eybike kest ba raykhe shver-un-shviger*" (Torah scholars and ordained rabbis eligible for wealthy brides with permanent room and board from rich parents-in-law). He recognizes the unrealized potential of these "*farblondzhete neshomes*" (lost souls) and fears not only that it will remain lost forever but also that in this Darwinian struggle, the fittest ones for survival will be those who,

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[154] Peretz Hirschbein, *Iber Amerike* (New York: Literarisher ferlag, 1918), 8.

[155] Ibid., 55.

[156] Ibid.

ethically and culturally, have the least to offer. "*Vos mer talmed-khokhem geven in der heym*" (The greater scholar he was back at home), suggests Hirschbein, "*alts greserer shlimazl do*" (the worse loser here).[157]

Reading Hirschbein's travelogues, it is easy to forget that his wife accompanied him on most of his trips: apart from the extremely rare and cursory references to "*mayn froy*" (my wife), he seldom mentions her. Although Shumiatcher is largely absent from Hirschbein's writings—as if his family life were irrelevant to and restricted from his readers—her influence on his writing is apparent in Hirschbein's treatment of women's issues, especially when compared to Shumiatcher's descriptions of her experiences as a woman. Indeed, Hirschbein's general focus on issues of morality emerges with particular force in his observations regarding the situation of women in the countries he visited. Both Shumiatcher and Hirschbein were especially appalled by the treatment of women in Latin America. The extent of Shumiatcher's indignation is clear from her emotional letter to Joseph Opatoshu, in which she apologizes for her prolonged silence and laments her miserable existence in Argentina: "*Far a man iz dos lebn do an ofener, a breyter. Far a froy iz dos di velt a farshlosene unter filfakhike shleser. . . . Deriber hob ikh zikh ayngeshlosn tsvishn di eygene fir vent un mit fardros in di oygn gekukt afn lebn*."[158] (For a man, life here is wide open. For a woman, this is a world locked up by different kinds of locks. . . . I therefore shut myself up alone in the four walls and look at life with eyes full of resentment.)

Hirschbein's distress over the mistreatment of women and his broader concern about the moral and cultural degeneration of Jewish immigrants found a fitting target in the problem of Jewish prostitution in Argentina and Brazil. On no other subject did Hirschbein write with such

[157] Ibid.

[158] Ester Shumiatcher, Letter to Yoysef Opatoshu (Jan 2, 1926), PPH (Folder 73).

indignation and personal anguish as he did the plight of East European Jewish women caught up in the white slave trade. Hence, he employs particularly dark imagery in the following portrait of a neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro: "*In yene gasn lakht der tayvl mit gal af dem yidishn goyrl in di vayte lender. A glid fun undzere glider foylt dort un der ipesh tsetrogt zikh breyt un vayt*."[159] (In those streets, the devil laughs with gall at the Jewish fate in the faraway countries. One of our limbs is rotting, and the stench is spreading far and wide). This reference to the stench of putrescence illustrates a prominent tendency in Hirschbein's writing on the subject of prostitution, that is, his use of metaphoric language with a strong dimension of physicality. He expresses his abhorrence through images of smell, taste, and touch, as if the inherent physicality of prostitution made it impossible for him to consider it on a solely intellectual or ethical level. Thus, he experiences physical pain when considering the contrast between traditional Jewish values and the moral decline he has witnessed: "*Dos tut vey, mir iz a skrukh ariber mayn layb ven di tsveyte tir fun a groyser yidisher bibliotek iz a shandhoyz*" (This hurts, it makes my body shudder, to see a brothel next door to a big Jewish library is).[160] The adjacency of the brothel to the Yiddish library has particularly upsetting implications for Hirschbein, as a writer whose books were likely to be part of the library's collection.

In proportion to his frustration over the despicable treatment of women in some countries, he expresses his delight at societies in which women are accorded greater esteem. It is notable that Hirschbein discovers such societies exclusively outside of Europe and North America—a bias that linked to his general inclination to idealize certain aspects of the non-Western world. Hirschbein's notes on Burma constitute one the most favorable travel accounts in his entire

[159] Peretz Hirschbein, *Indye: fun mayn rayze in Indye* (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1929), 189.

[160] Hirschbein, "Tsnies un prostitutsye," 2.

oeuvre—in large part because of his impressions of the elevated status of women in Burmese culture. "*Dos ershte vos varft zikh in di oygn az men kumt keyn Burma*" (The first thing that catches one's eye when one comes to Burma), writes Hirschbein with admiration, "*iz es di froy mit ir zelbstshtendikeyt*" (is the woman with her independence).[161] The terms used to describe Burmese women are positive throughout: "*energish*" (energetic), "*mitn ponem tsum lebn*" (facing life), "*dreyt dos redl*" (is at the wheel). Seeing women empowered and freed from the excessive control by men is to Hirschbein an "*opfrishung*" (refreshment).[162] This attitude is consistent with Hirschbein's works in other genres, including the play *Grine Felder* (Green Fields), in which the most active and confident characters are women, while the men are largely passive. This play presents an idyllic view of East European Jewish life in the Russian countryside, farming the land and in harmony with nature. In this connection, Hirschbein's observations in his travelogue about the role of women in agricultural regions of the United States are especially revealing:

> *Umetik iz in feld fun Nord-Amerike, vayl s'iz nit tsu zen di froy in di felder . . . . Di froy hot do ir ort in kikh oder in fabrik, ober nit in gots gebentshtn feld. . . . Der man melkt di ku un trogt dem shefl milkh in shtub arayn. In zayn memshole ligt do di muter erd un deriber iz in feld azoy umetik far undzern a mentshn.*[163]
>
> (One feels sad in the fields of North America because no women are to be found in them . . . . The woman's place here is in the kitchen or the factory but not in God's blessed field. . . . The man milks the cow and carries the container with milk to the house. It is *he* who rules over mother earth here, and this is why our people [East European Jews] feel so sad in this field.) For Hirschbein, the mere practice of farming is insufficient: he also requires gender balance, which to him is an essential part of *naturalness*, of a peaceful coexistence with nature.

Moved by what he saw as diseased émigré Jewish communities, Hirschbein sought a suitable remedy. In doing so, the secular Hirschbein came to express nostalgia for the *gedorim*

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[161] Peretz Hirschbein, "Burma: der toyer tsu Indye" (unpublished manuscript) (1927): 2, PPH.

[162] Ibid.

[163] Hirschbein, *Iber Amerike*, 39–40.

(boundaries) of traditional Judaism, its *aseres-hadibres* (Ten Commandments), and *mitsves ase un loysese* (the positive and negative commandments).[164] In his critical examination of modern Jewish culture, he harks back to the Haskalah and its message of integration, concluding that "*tsu fil hot men farbitn di yoytsres in der tsayt fun haskole*" (it was taken too far during [/in the confusion of] the Haskalah).[165] Hirschbein does not advocate embracing religion for its own sake; instead, he argues that the rejection of religion has had broader and more detrimental consequences than anticipated by the maskilic promoters of enlightenment and integration. Thus, he states, "*tsulib dem ekl tsu religye, hot men oykh kulturvertn aroysgevorfn*" (out of aversion for religion, cultural values got thrown out).[166] His universalism notwithstanding, Hirschbein challenges the principle of "*nihye kekhol hagoyim*" (we will be like all the other nations), which he feels has dominated Jewish life since the late nineteenth century. He goes on to assert the continued relevance of Jewish holidays, which can bring "*zunikeyt in der vokhedikeyt fun lebn*," the usefulness of traditional "*din-toyres*" (religious courts) in resolving personal and legal disputes, and the value of the Sabbath ("*Moral un sheynkeyt hot der shabes dem yidn gegebn*"; The Sabbath gave the Jews morality and beauty).[167]

Hirschbein's growing interest in the renewal of Jewish culture as an antidote to the ills of modern society was not accompanied by his abandonment of universalism. In fact, the ideal of a universal brotherhood leads Hirschbein to express support for the Soviet project—even though many Soviet attitudes and practices were clearly antithetical to his values and habits. Between

[164] Hirschbein, "Religye un kultur," 2.

[165] Ibid., 4.

[166] Ibid., 5.

[167] Ibid., 2.

1928 and 1929, Hirschbein spent several months in Crimea and later wrote an enthusiastic report about his encounter with the Jewish colonists "*in der groyser mishpokhe bafrayte sotsyalistishe republikn*" (in the large family of liberated socialist republics).[168] The vocabulary and tone of his Crimean travelogue, which extols the fact that "*oykh di yidishe arbetndike masn zoln aher vi pionern kumen zeyer kholem tsu farvirklekhn*" (also the Jewish working masses have come here as pioneers to realize their dream), conform to official Soviet propaganda of that period, while at the same time remaining recognizably Hirschbein's own. Even such nuances as the characteristic placement of the infinitive after the direct object—"*zeyer kholem tsu farvirklekhn*" rather than "*tsu farvirklekhn zeyer kholem*"—contributes to the poetic rhythm typical of this incorrigible romantic's writing. Hirschbein maintained his appreciation for the Soviet Union throughout his life. A year before his death, he received a request to compose a message to be read at a large Jewish meeting "on the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to commemorate 30 years of Jewish liberation from the Czaristic regime."[169] His response was one of unqualified praise for the country that "raised people's nations from the very dust and has given them a place under the sun."[170]

Hirschbein's diverse priorities and aspirations thus resulted in a seemingly inconsistent political position, which combined praising the Soviet Union with yearning for religious traditions, criticizing the Zionist stance on Yiddish with admiring *kvutsot* (Jewish agricultural settlements in Palestine), celebrating socialism with appreciating the freedoms of America. Yet although his views were characterized by genuine contradictions, there was also an internal

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[168] Peretz Hirschbein, *Shvartsbrukh: tsen khadoshim mit di yidishe ibervanderer in Ratn-farband* (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1930), 108–109.

[169] Joseph Brainin, Letter to Peretz Hirschbein (Oct 17, 1947), PPH (Folder 20).

[170] Peretz Hirschbein, Letter to Joseph Brainin (Oct 1947), PPH (Folder 20).

logic. From his concern about the Jews' worsening situation in Eastern Europe arose his acceptance of a multiplicity of possible emigration destinations. He was most vocal on the issue of the ideological divide between the supporters of Zionism and those who believed that the Jews should instead pin their hopes on Stalin's promises of a bright Jewish future in Birobidzhan (the Jewish Autonomous Oblast near the Soviet-Chinese border) and Crimea.

In an article published in an Argentinian Yiddish newspaper, Hirschbein attacks the polemicists in both camps as "*khakhomim bam pripetshik*" (sages by the stove), who are ignoring the urgency of the situation and overlooking the merits of both projects:

> *Ba di melamdim arum pripetshik iz di velt a nisele, men ken es tsvishn di baktseyner tseknakn; dos yidishe folk—a hayfele arbeslekh, men ken es ibershitn fun eyn keshene in der anderer, men ken es oykh a shit ton afn dil . . . : vet zikh es tsekayklen in ale vinkelekh. Vorem, az nisht—vi azoy volt gor gekent meglekh zayn itster a makhloykes tsvishn Birobidzhaner un Erets-Yisroel yidn?*[171]
>
> (Children's teachers by the stove think of the world as if it were a little nut that can be cracked between the teeth and of the Jewish people as if it were a handful of peas that could be moved over from one pocket into another or just dropped on the floor . . . so that it rolls around in every corner. Because if not—how is it at all possible that there should be a disagreement between the Jews in Birobidzhan and those in the Land of Israel?)

The allusion to Mark Varshavski's famous song "*Der alef-beys*" (The Alphabet) is part of Hirschbein's satire, but it also engages with the very essence of the song. First published in 1900, "*Der alef-beys*" depicts a melamed instructing little children in reading the Hebrew alphabet, one of the fundamental skills in Jewish culture. This song, which quickly became one of the most popular Yiddish *folkslider* (folksongs), was commonly perceived as an idealized picture of authentic Jewish *folkstimlekhkeyt* (folk spirit, folksiness)—with the image of the "*fayerl*" (little fire) serving to further reinforce the impression of emotional warmth. Yet "*Der alef-beys*" is less

[171] Peretz Hirschbein, "Afn pripetshik brent a fayerl," *Di prese* (October 6, 1935): 11.

about the intimacy of Jewish life in the shtetl than about the "*trern*" (tears) and "*geveyn*" (weeping) of the exhausted nation of exiles, whose only source of energy and stability lie in their culture and faith: "*az ir vet, kinderlekh, dem goles shlepn, oysgemutshet zayn, zolt ir fun di oysyes koyekh shepn*" (as you, dear children, pull [the heavy burden of] exile and become exhausted, may you draw strength from these letters).[172] In contrast, Hirschbein's article, which mocks the political wrangling around optimal destinations and ideologies, contends that the spiritual and cultural "*fayerl*" is not enough: Jews must act wisely and responsibly on the geographic, rather than merely the spiritual, plane.

Hirschbein's apparent political flexibility should not be equated with a lack of discernment or universal acceptance with respect to destinations for Jewish emigrants. Indeed, his attack on the "stove-side sages" conveys a conviction that Jews are not welcome in most places in the world:

> *Vu iz dervayl beemes dos "yidishe hoyz," oyb undzere zekhtsn-zibetsn milyon yidn haltn zikh nokh alts in oysshpreytn iber der velt leng-un-breyt? Oyb in yedn gresern un klenern yishev shoklt zikh, nisht nor der balkn ibern kop, nor mitn iker yesod iz men nisht zikher . . . ? . . . Tsi shteyt far zeyere oygn di virklekhkeyt fun a folk, vos zukht a mokem-miklet un gefint gor gantse "veltteyln" fun emetsn andersh farnumen? Tsi iz men toyfes di tragedye fun a folk vos zet nor in handl-vandl zayn kiyem . . . ?*
>
> (Where is now the real "Jewish home," if our 16–17 million Jews are still migrating around the world's entire length and breadth? If in every place of settlement, large and small, not just the rafter over one's head is trembling—one is uncertain about the very foundation . . . ? . . . Are you able to see in front of your eyes the reality of a people searching for a place of refuge and finding entire continents occupied by someone else? Does one grasp the tragedy of a nation whose existence only hinges on peddling . . . ?)

In the article's conclusion, Hirschbein is clear: instead of endlessly experimenting with indiscriminately chosen continents and countries, Jewish wanderers would do well to turn their

[172] Varshavski, *Yidishe folkslider*, 13.

eyes to Palestine and the Soviet Union, with a preference for the latter. While he explicitly states his general support for the Zionist project, the main emphasis of his argument is on debunking the supposed calumnies and misconceptions about Birobidzhan, which Hirschbein declares to be "*der onheyb fun a mentshlekher yidisher kultur*" (the beginnings of the human Yiddish culture).

Hirschbein's view of colonialism significantly informs his overall pessimistic perception of the current state of humanity: the "disease" that has affected the Jews has ravaged the entire world. In identifying the nature and the main "carriers" of the sickness, he lays the blame squarely on the West. It is questionable the extent to which he views himself and his fellow Jews as part of the pernicious influence of the "White Man" and thus similarly worthy of blame. While an implicit identification of Jews with the West may be inferred from many passages in Hirschbein's travelogues, this connection is rarely apparent in passages focusing on the demise of traditional non-European societies as a result of colonial domination. On the contrary, his texts draw implicit parallels between the Jews' vulnerable situation in Europe and non-European natives' suffering at the hands of Western powers.

Hirschbein characteristically does not suggest that the destruction effected by European colonial expansion is necessarily intentional. He acknowledges that "*avade lozt zikh dokh yederer eyntsiker avek in a vayt land mit likhtikere kavones*" (of course, everyone leaving for a distant country has brighter ideas).[173] According to Hirschbein, the problem is rather a lack of understanding and sensitivity. Much like the philosopher Spinoza, whom many Yiddish intellectuals of Hirschbein's generation revered, he contends that man's blindness to the inherent harmony of nature leads to universal suffering. Driven by greed and fear, the Western settler is driven to distant lands "*af di fligl fun dimyen*" (on the wings of imagination), but this intrusion

[173] Hirschbein, *Arum der velt (rayze-ayndrukn): 1920-1922*, 73.

brings no satisfaction.[174] His depiction of Sydney reveals this skepticism. After acknowledging the city's impressive size and urban sophistication, he soon shifts his attention to the ultimate futility and harmfulness of this expansion:

איך האָב זיך שוין לאַנג
מיאש געווען צו געפינען אין ווייטע וועלטן א ניי לעבן, וואָס דער
אייראָפּייער האָט באַשאַפן. נישט ער איז דאָס ביכולת צו טאָן.
איך דערמאָן זיך, ערגעץ וואו אין די טראָפּישע לענדער האָבן
מיר באַנאַכט די ווייסע מוראַשקעס אויפגענעסן די שיך און א צונאָב
דעם לעדערנעם טשעמאָדאַן. בויען דאָך די מוראַשקעס אויך. בויען
פּאַלאַצן פּאַר זיך און עסן אויף אימעצנס שיך.
אפשר אַבים[ל] איבערגעטריבן, אָבער אַווי איז דאָס פּאָרט מיט
דעם ווייסן מענטשן אין די ווייטע לענדער. איך בין אויסן דעם
אייראָפּייער מיט זיין ציוויליזאַציע. עפּעס בויט ער און דאָך צו־
שטערט ער. זיינע שיינע חלומות צושטערט ער געווים.[175]

> I have long given up on the idea of finding new life created by the European in faraway worlds. He is incapable of doing this.
> I recall how once, somewhere in the tropical countries, white ants devoured my shoes as well as my leather suitcase. Ants build, too. They erect palaces for themselves while devouring someone's shoes.
> Perhaps it is a slight exaggeration, but it is something similar with the white man in distant countries. I am talking about the European with his civilization. Even as he builds, he destroys. He certainly destroys his own beautiful dreams.

As is typical of his style, Hirschbein employs a metaphor involving nature. At first sight, his comparison of white people's actions to the behavior of wild ants is very straightforward: as is the norm throughout nature, a human culture grows at someone else's expense, and the destruction involved is unavoidable and thus excusable. Given the specific circumstances of his encounter with the Australian ants, Hirschbein would seem to have more reasons to complain about the ants than about his fellow Westerners—after all, it is to the former that his suitcase falls prey. But the deeper meaning of Hirschbein's metaphor is less advantageous to people. The insects' attack, even if resulting in the destruction of Hirschbein's personal belongings, is in

[174] Ibid.

[175] Ibid.

accordance with the natural order of things: the ants are not attacking other ants, and they are certainly nowhere close to destroying *their own dreams*. In the human case, the suffering is inflicted on members of one's own species. Not only that, but the resulting exploitative relationship does not even necessarily benefit the "aggressor": both the colonizer and the colonized suffer in the process of exporting Western civilization. Not only do the results tend to fall short of the colonizer's "dreams"—the messianic dreams of starting afresh and building a better and fairer life—but they often turn outright ugly, as the full scale of the violence and destruction required becomes apparent.

The more Hirschbein was saddened by his observations of people, the more he stressed his affinity for animals, mountains, and plants. As for nature's direct hostility toward humans, Hirschbein would much rather have people focus on protecting themselves against natural dangers than engage in wars and other forms of self-inflicted misery. Indeed, he is ready to argue that such dangers, by forcing people to unite and to become closer to nature, have a positive effect on the human spirit: *"dort vu zayn soyne vert a shlang, a skorpyon, a toyznt-fisiker oder gor di tarantele, di beyzste fun ale shpinen, dortn kukt der mentsh oys fil hartsiker un beser"* (in places where his enemy is a snake, a scorpion, a millepede, or even a tarantula, the most vicious of all spiders—there a person looks much kinder and better).[176]

It is therefore only natural that in his admiration for the native peoples' closeness to nature, Hirschbein is willing, if not to condone, then at least to reserve criticism of even such controversial cultural practices as cannibalism. Yet it is not moral relativism which motivates his equanimous attitude. In fact, certain aspects of cannibalistic practices provide him with additional tools to criticize the West. He informs the reader that the native inhabitants of the

[176] Ibid., 178.

Marquesas Islands used to refer to human flesh as "*der langer khazer*" (the long pig) in order to distinguish it from pork, or "*der kurtser khazer*" (the short pig).[177] Embracing this cannibalistic terminology, Hirschbein argues that, from an ethical point of view, the European settlers were not even worthy of being called *langer khazer* as their behavior made them look much more like *der kurtser khazer*, i.e., real pigs. Several centuries earlier, at the dawn of European colonization of South America, Michel de Montaigne's famous essay "On Cannibals" expressed a similar position: "the corruptions of this part of the world [i.e., the West] will one day cost [the natives] happiness and repose, and . . . the effect of this commerce will be their ruin."[178] Although not as original and progressive in the twentieth century, as Montaigne's ideas had been in sixteenth-century France, Hirschbein's literary treatment of the cannibals in French Polynesia sheds light on his aversion to colonial oppression and on his life philosophy in general.

Because of the diversity of his South Pacific itinerary, which in addition to Australia and New Zealand included Fiji, Vanuatu, and several other territories, Hirschbein was able to compare the whites' treatment of native peoples across the region. He acknowledges that New Zealand's policy toward the Maoris is "*teylvayz mentshlekh*" (partly humane), while arguing that Australia's record is indisputably the worst. Horrified by the treatment of Australian Aborigines, he describes their fate at the hands of Europeans as having been "*oysgesamt vi mayz*" (poisoned like mice) and claims that nowhere else have the natives been "*azoy brutal nisht bahandlt*" (treated so brutally).[179] Repeatedly, Hirschbein attempts to demonstrate that it is not the

[177] Ibid., 24.

[178] Michel de Montaigne, *Complete Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 150.

[179] Hirschbein, *Arum der velt (rayze-ayndrukn): 1920-1922*, 85.

colonized "cannibals" who should be feared but rather the white, "civilized" ones who purport to act on behalf of Western civilization to protect it from the "barbarians":

> *Imperyalistishe melukhes hobn tsugeklert a pakhed farn mizrekh, kedey zikh tsu kenen bavofenen. Shrekt men keseyder, az a tsayt vet kumen, ven di felker fun mizrekh veln oyfvakhn un veln zikh ale in eynem aveklozn un nemen nekome fun vaysn mentshn*.[180]
>
> Imperialist countries invented a fear of the East in order to be able to arm themselves. They constantly scare us that a time will come when the nations of the East will awaken and unite to take revenge on the white man.

This anti-imperialist passage comes from Hirschbein's account of his journey to India—a book imbued with a greater sense of peace than most of his other travelogues. Without idealizing India, he describes its culture and spirituality in such a way as to consistently reject the notion of the East as a "threat," suggesting instead that Europeans have much to learn from Hindus about how to live peaceful and happy lives.

Hirschbein's denunciation of Europeans, and especially of Christian missionaries, reaches its climax in his chapter on Tahiti. In his discussion of Tahitian sexuality, his rhetoric is full of ire and medicalized imagery, much like his account of Jewish prostitutes in Latin America. He draws a sharp distinction between Tahitians' traditional sexual freedom—natural, joyous, and innocent—and the *filthy* sexuality imported by the Europeans, whose interactions with the natives commenced with "*der oysbayt fun shtiklekh gloz af znus*" (the exchange of class speeds for prostitution).[181] Hirschbein stresses Europe's blindness and hypocrisy in its simultaneous introduction of prostitution and the Christian rhetoric against the natives' supposed lack of good sexual morals. The consequence of this double standard, he argues, was the destruction of indigenous culture, especially of erotic dance and song, and its replacement with

[180] Hirschbein, *Indye: fun mayn rayze in Indye*, 16.

[181] Hirschbein, *Arum der velt (rayze-ayndrukn): 1920-1922*, 26.

poverty, squalor, depression, and "*krankeytn fun der libe*" (venereal diseases, literally, "diseases of love").[182] He describes the new reality as a perversion of nature:

> איצטער שפּאצירט באם ברעג ארום א גלח אין זיין שוואַרצן לאַנגן בגד, אין א ווייסן איבערגעדרייטן קראַגן און הייליקט דעם ברעג מיט זיינע טריט. איצט גייט ארום אן אלטע פרוי איינגעוויקלט אין שמאטעס, א קינד פון פאַלינעזער שבט און רויבערט א פּאַפּיראַס אַרער לולקע. זייער געזאנג האָט מען פארשלעפּט אין קלויסטער אריין, געוואַרן פּאַרוואַנדלט אין דעם פרומען הימן. איצטער טאַנצט מען שוין מער נישט אויפן ברעג. אדום ברעג דרייען זיך ארום בעטלער און קוקן ארויס צו די שיפן וואָס קומען פון ווייטע, ווייטע לענדער, גאַסן־מיידלאך וואָס קוקן אויס די ליבע פון מאטראָזן.[183]

> Right now a priest in his long black garb, with a white upturned collar walks along the shore, sanctifying it with his footsteps. And now an old woman wrapped in rags, from a Polynesian tribe, is smoking a cigarette or a pipe. Their song was dragged into the church and transformed into a pious hymn. There is no more dancing on the shore. Loitering beggars are waiting for ships arriving from faraway places, and prostitutes are waiting for sailors' love.

It is this seemingly seamless transformation and reinterpretation of the local ways that Hirschbein claims is especially sinister. What was once natural and joyful was made to conform in a Procrustean manner to the dictates of the church. The unequivocally grim picture of beggars and prostitutes makes it impossible to take his earlier references to the priest's "*heylike*" (holy) footsteps and the "*frume*" (pious) church hymns at face value.

The mention of "*gasn-meydlekh*" (girls of the streets) accords with Hirschbein's broader concern for the plight of Tahitian women, whom he finds to be in a perpetual "*driml*" (slumber)—which he explains as a sign of unhealthy sexual repression, "*a faborgene tayve*" (a concealed passion). The natural beauty of the naked body is now laid to waste with the enforcement of clothing: *Unter yene kleyder velkt dos layb un falt ayn di brust. Unter yene kleyder veln untergeyn un oysgeloshn vern di kinder fun Tahiti mit zeyer kerperlekher sheynkeyt,*

[182] Ibid., 15.

[183] Ibid., 17.

vos tsu di geter fun altn Grikhnland iz zeyer sheynkeyt geglikhn geven.[184] (Under that clothing the body fades, and the breasts sink. Under those clothes the children of Tahiti are going to decline and become extinguished, with their physical beauty, which would be compared to the gods of ancient Greece.) Such focus on the idyllic eroticism of the Tahitian woman is noteworthy; after all, Hirschbein never mentions any direct encounters with it, instead treating it as suppressed, hidden, and crushed. The most plausible explanation is that his image of Tahiti was based on preconceived notions stemming from the art of Paul Gauguin as much as on his actual observations. It is not surprising that Gauguin's famous paintings of Tahitians, which convey a vision of Tahiti as a Garden of Eden, free of pain and unashamed of nakedness, appealed to Hirschbein's idealized view of nature and informed his perception of the islands.

Hirschbein's direct discussion of the famous French artist is, however, anything but idyllic. Gauguin stayed in Tahiti for nearly a decade, before moving to the Marquesas Islands in 1901, where he died two years later. Nevertheless, Hirschbein imagines him still present "*ergets in di shpaltn fun di tahiter berg*" (somewhere in the crevices of the Tahitian mountains), transformed by death and yet still alive: "*Es zaynen zayne finger lang fun der beyzer tsoraas oyfgefresn gevorn un zayne oygn zaynen fun di nestn oysgerunen, ober dos vilde blut zingt di roytkeyt fun di tahiter blumen un dos harts tsitert dem letstn tsiter ergets tsvishn di blas-vayse un grin-vayse tyere-Tahiti*."[185] (His fingers have long been devoured by vicious leprosy, and his eyes have leaked out from his eye sockets, and yet his wild blood sings the redness of the Tahitian flowers, and his heart quivers its final quiver among the pale white and green light Tierra Tahiti.) This vision of Gauguin's decomposition is among the most graphically physical in

[184] Ibid., 16.

[185] Ibid., 14.

Hirschbein's entire oeuvre. In accordance with popular opinion at the time, Hirschbein assumes that Gauguin died of syphilis, and he turns the artist's physical demise into a powerful symbol of Tahiti's general fate. The defiant "singing" of Gauguin's "wild blood" is equivalent to the repressed song of the Tahitian natives: while the artist exhibits signs of life even in his death, his female models are being buried while still alive. There is yet another implication in Hirschbein's reference to Gauguin's disease. However beautiful his paintings, the artist was an intruder from the West. He may have been able to capture the authentic culture of the local people, but he was also part of the forces of its demise. Thus, driven by the "*vild blut in zayne odern*" (wild blood in his veins), Gauguin shared his country's collective responsibility and bore part of the punishment.

Hirschbein's critique of colonialism and the oppression of native peoples and cultures informs one dimension of his notion of peace, elaborated in his various travelogues. Another (related) dimension that is seen throughout his writing is the connection to the natural world. In most cases, Hirschbein's relationship with a new country begins with an examination of nature. Although the primary subject of his book *Shvartsbrukh* (Fallow Field; 1930) is on the Jewish communist agricultural colonies in the Crimea, he opens his narrative with a hymn to the beauty of the Crimean steppe: "*step badarf men kenen lib hobn*" (loving the steppe takes special ability).[186] In his characteristically poetic style, he goes on to describe the peninsula's geography and climate: "*Krimer halbindzl kukt aroys tsum oryent un in mitn nopl tsugeknipt tsu tsofn. Tsiklopish shpiln do di vintn*."[187] (The Crimean peninsula is facing the east and is umbilically attached to the north. Winds are playing like Cyclops.)

[186] Hirschbein, *Shvartsbrukh: tsen khadoshim mit di yidishe ibervanderer in Ratn-farband*, 17.

[187] Ibid., 108.

In particularly positive accounts of a destination, Hirschbein observes a unity between elements of human culture and nature. For example, his enthusiastic description of the Zulu language in South Africa is dominated by a comparison of the Zulu click consonants to the "*tirtltoybs gezang*" (turtledove's song).[188] Hirschbein's treatment of Zulu is at times reminiscent of Hassidic folklore, echoes of which often appear in his writing—especially on this favorite subject of the spiritual union with nature. Hirschbein's suggestion that "*der knak mit der tsung . . . iz efsher oykh ba di feygl faranen*" (the click with the tongue . . . and perhaps also be found among birds) brings to mind stories about the Baal Shem Tov's practice of learning the art of song from wild birds—as is described in the following Hassidic folksong: "*fun Kosev biz Kitev zaynen feygelekh faranen, / avu der bal-shem lernen shire iz geganen*" (between Kosev and Kitev there are little birds, where the Baal Shem would go to study song [religious hymns]). The notion of learning hymns from avian song was drawn upon by a number of Yiddish writers, including Sholem Asch, whose famous novel *Der tilim-yid* (The Sayer of Psalms; 1934) portrays a tzaddik who regularly goes "*in feld arayn, kedey tsu zen gots bashaf un freyen zikh mit im, tsu hern di feygelekh zingen shire un zikh optsulernen fun zey muser*" (into the field in order to see God's creation and rejoice with it, to hear birds singing hymns of praise and to be instructed by them in good morals).[189]

Much of Hirschbein's writing is such an attempt to learn from birds, animals, trees, and other elements of nature—an aspiration akin to the early Hasidic masters' focus on nature's divinity. As he walks through the Palermo district of Buenos Aires, Hirschbein observes the contributions of different countries to the Argentina centennial celebrations: "*England,*

[188] Hirschbein, *Arum der velt (rayze-ayndrukn): 1920-1922*, 128.

[189] Sholem Asch, *Der tilim-yid* (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1937), 555.

Daytshland, Shpanyen, Italyen, Portugal un . . . ver hot den dort keyn kheylek nit?" (England, Germany, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and . . . all of them have contributed something.)[190] But before long he shifts attention to nature and declares that the beauty of the sky and trees trumps every other kind of beauty: "*vu azoy fil sheyne beymer vaksn, vu s'iz azoy fil himl faranen—dos iz dokh imer dos shenste*" (where so many beautiful trees grow, where there is so much sky, which is, after all, always the most beautiful part).[191]

Hirschbein's dream of rustic peace puts him at odds with such places as New York City and leads him to denounce as "*meshugas*" (insanity) and "*a bild fun tseshterung*" (a sight of destruction) what writers such as Ravitch extolled as a majestic carnival of diversity.[192] In order to understand the degree of Hirschbein's originality, it is instructive to compare his treatment of New York with other authors' typical passages about the same city. An essay by Sh. Almi presents an idealized image of New York as the quintessence of diversity: "*Amerike iz dafke dort, vu di bafelkerung iz a gemishte, vu es lebn un shtrebn daytshn, yidn, polyakn, rusn, ungarn, khinezer, yapaner, siryer—un di zin un tekhter fun nokh hunderter felker un rasn*" (America is precisely where the population is a mixed one, where Germans, Jews, Poles, Russians, Hungarians, Chinese, Japanese, and Syrians, and the sons and daughters of hundreds of other peoples, live and aspire).[193] New York represents Almi's ideal of America—a country of immigrants, dynamism, and constant renewal—which is why the *other*, quieter, face of America holds no appeal for him: "*fort iber di ekht-amerikanishe shtet un shtetlekh—un es glust zikh aykh*

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[190] Hirschbein, *Fun vayte lender: Argentine, Brazil; yuni-november 1914*, 54.

[191] Ibid.

[192] Hirschbein, *Iber Amerike*, 19.

[193] Almi, *Literarishe nesies*, 478.

tsu genetsn" (try traveling through the purely American cities and towns, and you feel like yawning).[194] Hirschbein's preferences are the exact opposite: he finds it inexplicable that the majority of Jewish immigrants prefer to stay in the cacophonous megalopolis, while "*bloyz eyn nakht gerayzt mitn ban*" (only a single-night train ride away) they would find "*a likhtike, groyse un fraye velt*" (a bright, big, and free world).[195]

Consequently, Hirschbein's highest praise for a country is to deem it a place of peace and calm; invariably, such countries were far from Europe. Thus, despite his indignation over the treatment of Aborigines, large and sparsely populated Australia remained one his favorite destinations. In a letter to Ravitch, who at the time was visiting Australia, Hirschbein sounds wistful and perhaps a little jealous: "*Dortn iz faran shalve. Oft trakht ikh vegn Avstralye*."[196] (There is peace there. I often think about Australia.) The Hebraic word "*shalve*" (peace, rest) is a key term in Hirschbein's travelogues. He uses it again in connection with Burma, describing "*yene shalve vos ikh hob in Burma dershpirt vi nor ikh bin fun shif arop*" (the peace that I felt in Burma right upon disembarking from the ship).[197] Hirschbein's affection for Burma was part of his overall preference for the East over the West. "*Der prints fun der shtilkeyt*" (The prince of silence)—as Ravitch aptly referred to Hirschbein—was naturally drawn to Eastern mysticism with its emphasis on peace and spiritual concentration.[198] In Burma, Hirschbein found a Southeast Asian embodiment of his "*grine felder*" ideal, namely a harmonious combination of

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[194] Ibid., 479. values Jewishness as human culture (more so than for its own sake). Hence his contradictory politics and ideology.

[195] Hirschbein, *Iber Amerike*, 52.

[196] Peretz Hirschbein, Letter to Meylekh Ravitch (Mar 25, 1936), PPH (Folder 98).

[197] Hirschbein, "Burma: der toyer tsu Indye," 4.

[198] Meylekh Ravitch, "Perets Hirshbeyn: tsum dikhters kumen keyn Poyln," *Folkstsaytung (W)* (January 6, 1928): 6.

natural beauty, agricultural work, ancient traditions, and art: "*Dos land, vu nayn tsentl fun der bafelkerung git zikh op mir erdarbet, vu rayz iz der hoyptartikl vos di erd git aroys, fun dest vegn hot dos land a khush far kunst*" (The country where nine-tenths of the population engage in agriculture, where rice is the staple grain produced by the soil, and yet this country has a taste for art).[199]

There was another element to Hirschbein's fascination with places such as Burma, India, and Japan, namely the Jewish lens through he observed the East. In a letter to Opatoshu, written in India, Shumiatcher hints that there is a connection between her husband's spending time in the East and his renewed interest in Jewish culture: "*Vu zenen mir nit oysgeven? Durkh vos far a midboryes hobn mir nit durkhgevandert . . . ? . . . Perets hot nokh keyn mol nit gehat aza benkshaft tsu der yidisher gas vi er hot durkhgelebt afn oryent . . . .*"[200] (Where did they not go? Which deserts have they not crossed? . . . Peretz never felt such a yearning for Jewish life. . . .) Shumiatcher was not alone in noting the Jewish connotations of Hirschbein's writings about the East. In his praise of Hirschbein's travel notes about Japan, Shmuel Niger suggests a special reason for Hirschbein's visit to produce writing that he finds so meaningful:

> *Ikh lern fil fun ayer shraybn. Haynt vifl lernt ir shoyn aleyn! Epes zenen mir dokh aleyn oykh shtiklekh oryentaln, un yednfals zenen undz yene alte felker nenter un farshtendlekher vi der yungvarg—di eyropeishe felker*.[201]
>
> I've been learning a lot from your writing. And how much you must be learning! Don't we, after all, partially also belong to the East? Be it as it may, those ancient nations feel closer and more understandable to us than the young ones, the Europeans.

[199] Hirschbein, "Burma: der toyer tsu Indye," 3.

[200] Ester Shumiatcher, Letter to Yoysef Opatoshu (Apr 14, 1927), PPH (Folder 73).

[201] Niger.

Once again, the artistically and politically problematic subject of the Jews' essential foreignness to Europe—often expressed, both by Jewish and non-Jewish authors, through the image of the Wandering Jew—is evoked, in this case in connection with travel in the East.

The specifically Jewish features of Hirschbein's perception of the East's mystical traditions are evinced in his description of "*khsidish-mistisher Indye*" (Hassidic-mystical India): it is a place where "*dos folk banugnt zikh mit gornit; ken lebn fun taneysim un zikh durkhredn mit shtern*" (people are content with having nothing, can subsist on fasts, and talk to the stars).[202] One of the most characteristic moments in *Indye* (India; 1929) is Hirschbein's account of the night he spent at the house of Rabindranath Tagore. Hirschbein was joined by his wife, who later wrote about the strong impression that Tagore made on her: "*Di tsayt vos mir hobn farbrakht mit Tagorn vet far mir blaybn umfargeslekh*" (I will never forget the time that we spent with Tagore).[203] It is clear from his account that Hirschbein was similarly moved. The encounter with the renowned Bengali poet, writer, artist, and musician was not just an encounter with a foreign and exotic culture. Hirschbein describes his eagerness to establish a dialogue and to look for parallels between their two cultures:

— אַ וואונדערלעך פּאָלק, דאָס יידישע – דאָס טאָג־אויף נאָך אַ לאַנגען שטילשווייגן אַרויסגעוואָגט — אַזוי צעוואָרפן איבער דער וועלט, אַזוי צעשפּרייט, און פונדעסטוועגן אויף אַלע געביטן אַזוי פּראָדוקטיוו. אַ וואונדערלעך פּאָלק.

דאָס איז געווען אַן ענטפער אויף מיינע רייד איבער אונזער לימערַאטור אין די לעצטע יאָרן. איך האָב דערציילט געוואָלט אויסמעסטן דעם שטח, וואָס האָט זיך אויסגעשפּרייט צווישן מיר, דעם יידישן שרייבער, און אים, דעם בענגאַלישן. אונזער שמועס האָט זיך געצויגן. וועדמער ווינען געפאַלן ווינציק: „מזרח", „מערב", „אידאָפּע". „סאציאַלע רעוואָלוציע און רוסלאַנד". „אמעריקע" און אינדיע". „מענטש און וועלט". „פרייד פון לעבן און שטויב, וואָס ליגט זיך אויף די בּאָדווענע פּים..."[204]

[202] Hirschbein, *Indye: fun mayn rayze in Indye*, 7–8.

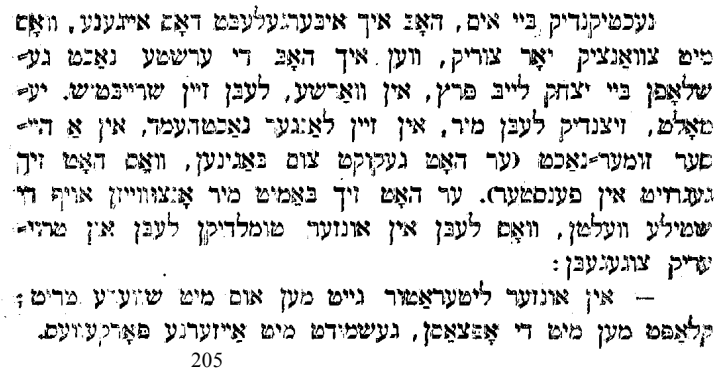
[203] Shumiatcher.

[204] Hirschbein, *Indye: fun mayn rayze in Indye*, 167.

> "The Jews are a remarkable people," Tagore uttered after a long silence. "So dispersed and scattered all over the world, it's so productive in every field. A remarkable people."
> This was in response to what I had told him about the situation of our literature in recent years. My intention has been to measure out the space that lay between me, a Yiddish writer, and him, a Bengali one. Our conversation went on. Few words were spoken: "the East," "the West," "Europe," "the social revolution in Russia," "America and India," "man and the world," "the joy of life and the dust that covers once bare feet . . . " (ellipsis in original)

The subject of British colonial rule in India occupies an important place in Hirschbein's *Indye*, and there is an implicit suggestion that the Jewish people's political vulnerability and lack of independence have relevance to Tagore's concerns about his own homeland. It is notable therefore that the short statement about the Jewish people's worldwide dispersion is the only complete sentence by Tagore quoted in this entire chapter. It is also significant that instead of attempting to reconstruct their conversation in full, Hirschbein merely mentions some of the key terms that hint at the topics he and Tagore discussed. The abbreviated manner in which Hirschbein records this conversation—which is presented as one of the most powerful impressions of his Indian journey—draws attention to the theme of *silence* (the words he uses are "*shtilkeyt*" and "*shvaygn*"), which is central both to this specific travelogue and to the rest of Hirschbein's oeuvre.

The visit with Tagore allows Hirschbein to bring together several aspects of his manifold identity: his Jewishness, his Yiddish writing, his yearning for peace, and his fascination with the idea of silence. All of these themes merge into one powerful image, when the narrative abruptly shifts to a moment from the distant past in Warsaw. The bearded face of Tagore—reminiscent of a majestic biblical prophet—is suddenly transformed into the familiar face of Hirschbein's Yiddish literary "guru" Peretz:



נעכטיקנדיק בּיי אים, האָב איך איבערגעלעבט דאָס אײַנענע, וואָס
מיט צוואַנציק יאָר צוריק, וועו איך האָב די ערשטע נאַכט גע-
שלאָפן בּיי יצחק לייב פּרץ, אין וואַרשע, לעבן זײַן שרײַבטיש. יע-
מאָלט, זיצנדיק לעבן מיר, אין זײַן לאַנגער נאַכטהעמד, אין אַ היי-
סער זומער-נאַכט, ער האָט געקוקט צום בּאַגינען, וואָס האָט זיך
געגרויט אין פענסטער. ער האָט זיך באַמיט מיר אָנצוווײַזן אויף די
שטילע וועלטן, וואָס לעבן אין אונזער טומלדיקן לעבן אין שרי-
טיק צוגעגעבן:

— אין אונזער ליטעראַטור גייט מען מיט שווערע טריט;
קלאַפּט מען מיט די אָפּצאַטן, געשמידט מיט אײַזערנע פּאָרקעווע.

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> While staying ver at his [Tagore's] house, I had the same experience as twenty years earlier, when I spent my first night at I. L. Peretz's in Warsaw, by his writing task. [Peretz] was then sitting next to me in his long nightshirt, on that hot summer night, and was awaiting dawn, as gray light began to appear in the window. He tried to show me the silent worlds that exist in the midst of our life's noise and added sadly: "[Writers] in our literature walk with heavy footsteps, clinking with the heels that hold iron horseshoes."

It would be hard to imagine a more prominent sign of Hirschbein's appreciation of Tagore than the evocation of Peretz. The image of the "*shvere trit*" (heavy footsteps) and "*optsasn*" (heels) used by Peretz is essential for Hirschbein's own implicit "manifesto" of a *different* path in Yiddish literature. The recollection of Peretz in the middle of the book about India contributes to Hirschbein's construction of a literary *yikhes* that supports his artistic choices, including his incessant travel and his persistent if not overly optimistic resigned search of peace.

While much of his travel writing privileges universalism over specifically Jewish concerns, Hirschbein never denies or rejects his Jewishness. Pilniak states that upon first noticing the Hirschbeins in the hotel reading room in Nara, he imagined them to be a Swede and a Frenchwoman.[206] Hirschbein later told him that "*всегда, с первых же слов знакомства, он говорит о своей национальности*" (from the first moments of meeting someone he states his ethnicity), in order to avoid any potential unpleasantness later:

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[205] Ibid., 166.

[206] Pilniak, "Olenii gorod Nara."

> *Очень многажды раз было в его жизни, когда, — по быту его жизни, по его наружности, костюмам и манерам, по тем отелям, где они останавливались, — часто не узнавали их национальности и, узнав, очень часто, делали вид, что их не узнают*.[207]
>
> It happened to him many times that because of his lifestyle, appearance, dress, and manners, as well as the kinds of hotels [he and his wife] stayed at, their ethnicity would at first not be identified, but, once it was, [people] would very often pretend not to know them.

Hirschbein's need for such a strategy is a powerful reminder of both his worldly sophistication and the prevalence of antisemitic prejudices at the time.

Indeed, throughout his travel writing, Hirschbein's descriptions draw clear parallels between his own vulnerability as a Jew and the racial stereotypes associated with colonialism. In a chapter documenting his sea voyage to Tahiti, he mentions a "young and elegant" Japanese doctor, a fellow passenger on the ship, who threw himself into the sea after being scorned by a young lady as "*a geln yapaner*" (a yellow Japanese).[208] This tragic story is followed immediately by an account of Hirschbein's own experience of prejudice in connection with yet another passenger, an Australian priest, with whom he had had amiable conversations in the first few days of the voyage: once the fact of Hirschbein's Jewishness is revealed, "*der galekh fun Melborn lozt arop di oygn az ikh gey farbay, un zayn frume vayb hot oyfgehert tsu zogn 'gut-morgn'*" (the priest from Melbourne lowers his eyes when I walk past, and his pious wife stopped saying "Good morning").[209] Significantly, it is most frequently in passages describing the experience of prejudice that Hirschbein's Jewishness comes to the fore. One important implication is the inevitability and inescapability of Jewishness and its challenges. No matter

[207] Ibid.

[208] Hirschbein, *Arum der velt (rayze-ayndrukn): 1920-1922*, 9.

[209] Ibid.

how "universalist" a Jewish writer's attitude, Jews can neither evade the world's hostility nor escape from themselves and their Jewish essence. It will take Hirschbein another couple of decades to convey this message in a much more specific and powerful way.

Antisemitism, was not, however, the precondition for Hirschbein's Jewish identity, as is commonly claimed with regard to Soviet Jewry, for example. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, one of the most characteristic aspects of Hirschbein's persona was the way in which the same elements that caused his chance acquaintances to mistake him for a non-Jewish European were combined with his reputation of a real *folksmentsh*—as poet Kadia Molodowsky (1894–1974) affectionately referred to him:

> אין הירשבייגען וואַכט שטענדיק דער פֿאָלקס־מענטש. אַפֿילו
> וועַן הירשביין שטייט אָנגעלענט אין זײַן שענסטער פּאָזע בײַם
> שנאָבל פֿון זײַן פֿייגל־שיף און באַטראַכט דעם ברענענדיקן האָרי־
> זאָנט פֿון אַ וווּנדער־לאַנד — אַפֿילו יעמאָלט כאַפּט זיך אַרויס דער
> פֿאָלקס־מענטש, וואָס האָט אָנגעזאַמלט אָן אַ שיעור דערפֿאַרונגען
> און קלוגשאַפֿט אין דעם ערלעכן לעבן פֿון דער יידישער מאַסע.[210]

> The *folksmentsh* is always awake in Hirschbein. Even when Hirschbein, in his most elegant pose, stands leaning in the bow of a bird-like ship and gazes at the burning horizon in some wonderful land—even then the *folksmentsh* awakens in him, with the infinite experiences and wisdom acquired from the moral life of the Jewish masses.

The cultural framework behind Molodowsky's portrait of Hirschbein is characterized by certain contradictions. On one hand, she bases her assessment on the opposition between the Yiddish writer and the "*yidisher mase*" (Jewish masses), while, on the other hand, she refers to Hirschbein as a *folksmentsh*—a term that would seem to imply cultural unity and belonging. The apparent inconsistency derives from the alienation that became a central theme of Yiddish literary discourse beginning most famously with the work of Peretz. Writers such as Molodowsky were driven more by longing for bona fide Yiddish culture than by the enthusiasm

[210] Niger and Elkin, *Perets Hirshbeyn: tsu zayn zekhtsikstn geboyrn-tog*, 152.

for cultural expansion and liberation that characterized the early days of Yiddish literature. In the balancing act of being a modern Western intellectual while at the same time preserving the *pintele yid* (Jewish essence), it was the latter that drew the most attention. Hence the characteristic image of the *folksmentsh*—akin to a mysterious benevolent dybbuk—that "*vakht*" tirelessly inside the writer's soul.

Molodowsky's appreciation for the "burning horizon of a wonderland" in Hirschbein's travelogues presumes the Jewish authenticity of his literary voice. Even if what the narrator described was remote and alien, his cultural identity ensured their value within the body of Yiddish artistic creation. In contrast to the popular perception of travel literature by the "general public"—hundreds of thousands of ordinary readers of Yiddish newspapers—the smaller community of writers, artists, and intellectuals had a heightened awareness of the collective project of constructing the edifice of "modern Yiddish literature." The discourse surrounding this "project" was characterized by the internal criteria of genuineness, loyalty, continuity, and progress. To members of this cultural elite, Hirschbein's output in the travelogue genre was inseparable from his overall persona, which was expressed with even greater clarity in his other works, including his plays and autobiographic writings. His place in the Yiddish literary world was sanctified by critics such as Mayzil, who in an endeavor to establish Hirschbein's *yikhes*—his eminent lineage among the fundamental reference points of Yiddish letters—rapturously praises Hirschbein's memoir, *Mayne kinder-yorn* (My Childhood Years; 1932), for its discovery of an "*emesn yidishn folkstimlekhn kval*" (authentic Jewish folk source).[211] By Mayzil's estimation, the writer's portrayal of his father and himself possibly surpassed the genius of the venerable Sholem Aleichem: "*epes a min fartifter Tevye der milkhiker un Peretsl—a min Motl*

[211] Nakhmen Mayzil, Letter to Peretz Hirschbein and Ester Shumiatcher (May 7, 1933), PPH (Folder 26).

Peysi dem khazns—shoyn fil fartifter" (a deeper version of Tevye, the dairyman, and Peretsl, and even more sophisticated variation on Motl, the son of Peysi, the Cantor). There could hardly be a greater compliment than the invocation of Aleichem's Tevye, a literary character that came to symbolize the *pintele yid* for modern Yiddish culture. The appellation "*folkstimlekh*" (folk/sy) evokes another literary luminary, Y. L. Peretz and his famous collection of short stories *Folkstimlekhe geshikhtn* (Folktales; 1904).

It is worth noting that Yiddish writers' focus on celebrating Jewishness was often a response to the sociopolitical situation in which they found themselves. In a manner not unlike many assimilated Jewish *narodniks'* transformation into intellectuals deeply committed to specifically Jewish causes following the wave of pogroms in Russia, rising antisemitism during the interwar period and, later, the horrors of the Holocaust propelled the majority of Yiddish writers to cling to their Jewishness with renewed fervor and appreciation. Thus, Hirschbein's increased focus on the need to preserve Jewish culture—for no other reason than its being *Jewish*—which is apparent in some of his later writings, comes as no surprise.

Hirschbein's postwar attitude is abundantly illustrated in his brief letter to the director of the newly established Yiddish theater in Buenos Aires, who had invited Hirschbein to attend the official ceremony of the theater's opening. In two short paragraphs, Hirschbein declines the invitation but sends his good wishes and expresses hope that the theater will be a bastion of national culture and spirit. The letter is heavily dominated by various derivatives of the root *yid* (Jew), appearing in nearly every sentence: Hirschbein applauds the idea of creating "*a yidishn teater*" (a Yiddish theater) in a "*yidishn tsenter*" (Jewish center), which will contribute to the growth of a "*yidishe velt*" (Jewish world) based on the values of "*yidishkeyt*" (Jewishness) and

will help raise new generations of "*yidn*" (Jews).[212] This superabundance betrays a feeling of nostalgia and a strong desire to ensure the continuity of Yiddish culture. It is impossible to ignore the fact that this correspondence took place less than two years after the end of World War II, when the shock of the Holocaust was still achingly fresh.

The most original feature of Hirschbein as a Yiddish travel writer—a feature that distinguishes him most sharply from Ravitch—is his consistent rejection of the notion that travel possesses an inherent value. The approach to travel that Hirschbein exemplified finds resonance in an eloquent quote from Montaigne: "I ordinarily reply to those who ask me the reason for my travels that I know well what I am fleeing from but not what I am looking for. If they tell me that among foreigners, there may be just as little health and that their ways are no better than ours, [I say] that it is always a gain to change a bad state for an uncertain one."[213] Hirschbein's justification for traveling, however, excludes the expectation of any "gain." According to Pilniak, when asked directly his motivations, Hirschbein gives the following answer: "I travel not in order to arrive, but in order to depart. I wander around the world not because I want to see what I have not seen before, but because I cannot bear seeing what I have already seen."[214] This mode of wandering, which some might characterize as *purposeless*, was atypical for Jewish culture, in which great emphasis had always been placed on building strong communities, and, if necessary, *re*building them in new places.

Hirschbein's view of wandering, while at times romantic, was also distinct from the positive appreciation of Jewish wandering represented by authors such as Eynhorn. For

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[212] Peretz Hirschbein, Letter to Volf Barbalat (Oct 28, 1946), PPH (Folder 20).

[213] Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, 743.

[214] "Я езжу по свету не потому, что я приезжаю, а потому, что я уезжаю. Я брожу по миру не потому, что я хочу увидать невиданное, но потому, что я не могу видеть знаемое." Pilniak, "Olenii gorod Nara."

Hirschbein, there is a solemnity that characterizes the connection between Jewishness and travel. Hirschbein describes his encounter on the Pacific island of Rarotonga with a lone Jew, who had left Posen as a child, arrived on the Cook Islands as a young merchant, and helped to convince the local native leaders to submit to British rule. His tone is anything but celebratory: "*Der grayz-groyer hot geveynt ven ikh hob im dertseylt, az azoy fil yidn zenen faranen iber gor der velt . . . —er aleyn hot zikh far mit bavizn afn indzl vi a simbol fun yidishn folk*" (The hoary old man wept when I told him that around the world there are so many Jews . . . —he seemed to me to symbolize the Jewish people).[215] For Eynhorn and, albeit in a very different manner, Ravitch, the image of the *alter groyer yid* in Rarotonga would, in his very loneliness, convey a sense of empowerment as confirmation of the Jew's universal reach. In contrast, Hirschbein's works link the worldwide dispersion of the Jewish people to the themes of loss and sadness. While Hirschbein's travel writing, given its vast scope, contains varied themes and approaches, his sense of deep melancholy regarding homelessness, wandering, and, by extension, *voluntary travel*, is apparent from his earliest treatments of the subject and through the rest of his literary career.

In attempting to understand other dimensions of the peace that Hirschbein sought in travel, it is especially enlightening to consider one of his earliest works, the short story "*Vanderer-troymen*" (The Dreams of a Wanderer; 1908). Written before he began his travels, this work cannot be viewed as Hirschbein's reaction to an actual experience of travel; rather, it is a reflection of fundamental features of this writer's personality. Compared with Hirschbein's later works, "*Vanderer-troymen*" betrays, to an extent, the literary immaturity of an ardent epigone of European romantic Symbolists such as the Russian poet Aleksandr Blok and the

[215] Hirschbein, *Arum der velt (rayze-ayndrukn): 1920-1922*, 34.

Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck. The following sentence sounds almost like a parody of this style: "*Ibern vald hot zikh di nakht aropgelozn, un af a tsvayg tsvishn di grine frilings-bleter hot di nakhtigal in ir getriler zikh fargangen, s'harts fun vald farkisheft*" (Night fell throughout the forest, and on a branch among the green spring leaves, the nightingale burst out singing its trills, casting a spell over the forest's heart.)[216] Works of this kind led the Soviet Yiddish writer and critic Shmuel Gordon to charge Hirschbein with falling into "*примитивную мистику*" (primitive mysticism).[217] This relative rawness is valuable, however, as a window onto the earliest phase of Hirschbein's exploration of the subject of wandering.

In addition to the narrator—a dreamy young man in search of happiness—"*Vanderer-troymen*" features two characters: *der groyser got* (the great God) and the mysterious *du* (the singular form of *you*; thou), who is the object of the narrator's search. The *du* is never identified by name; the identity appears to be alternately the young man's mother and his beloved. The work's structure and vaguely mystical tone are reminiscent not only of European Symbolism but also of the older symbolist style of Rabbi Nahman's tales with its kings, lost princesses, and other characters representing God, the Messiah, the Jews, and the Cabbalistic attributes of divinity. Similar to those tales, "*Vanderer-troymen*" opens with the paradisiacal vision of a distant land of happiness, which was lost and needs to be restored: "*Vayt, gor vayt, af yener zayt midboryes un yamen, iz a land faranen, dos land fun gezang un harmonyen*" (Far, far away, across deserts and seas, there is a country, the country of song and harmonies).[218] The reader soon learns of a crisis that befell this magical place at a moment in the past; the sun hid itself

[216] Peretz Hirschbein, "Vanderer-troymen," in *Mayn bukh* ([Vilna]: [n.p.], 1913), 13.

[217] Shmuel Gordon, "Girshbein, Perets," *Literaturnaia entsiklopedia* (Moscow: Kommunisticheskaia akademia, 1929).

[218] Hirschbein, "Vanderer-troymen," 5.

from the people and produced in them a profound sense of longing: "*di hertser raysn zikh—un bizn letstn tsiter hern zey nit oyf tsu zingen un tsu benken*" (the hearts are trembling—and to the last quiver they won't cease singing and yearning).[219] What is this image if not an allegory of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden? Moments such as these evince the Jewish mystical allusions that were undoubtedly part of Hirschbein's literary language.

"*Vanderer-troymen*" contains a key to Hirschbein's vision of himself as a modern Jewish nomad: "*Fun yenem umglik-gliklekhn land iz di neshome mayne*" (My soul comes from that happy-unhappy country)[220] Like the exiled *ben-meylekh* (prince) and *bas-malke* (princess) of Nahman's complex parables, Hirschbein's narrator claims to have been inserted into an alien environment; yet in the case of the narrator of "*Vanderer-troymen*," the alien environment is at times his own.

The narrator of "*Vanderer-troymen*" wanders by necessity rather than from a genuine love for wandering, even though his first words as a child express a desire for leaving home: "*Mame, mir iz do eng in dayn shtibl, kh'vil mir in der groyser velt arayn lozn*" (Mother, I feel cramped in your little house, I want to go into the big world).[221] A telling comparison can be made with Itzik Manger's famous poem "*Afn veg shteyt a boym*" (On the Road Grows a Tree), in which the little boy's dream of becoming a bird and flying away remains unrealized because of the intensity of the bond between mother and son. The narrator of "*Vanderer-troymen*," who succeeds in leaving his mother, is driven by different motivations, namely a search for

[219] Ibid., 6.

[220] Ibid., 17.

[221] Ibid., 13.

redemption that will obviate all further wandering. It concludes with his bright vision of the future, in which God himself will eradicate the multiplicity of roads that cover and divide earth:

דער גרויסער גאָט וועט מיט זיין אייביגער האַנט צופיהרען אַלע
וועגען, אַלע שטעגען, וואָס דער עלענד האָט פאַר די מענשען־קינדער
אויסגעטראָטען —
די מעכטיגע האַנט וועט אויסוואָרצלען אַלע פלאַנצען, וואָס זענען
אויסגעוואַקסען בײַ די זייטען וועגען דורך די טרערען־פון אייביגע מיעדע
וואַנדערער — — —
דער גרויסער גאָט וועט מיט זיין האַנט אָנצייכענען אַ נייעם וועג פאַר׳ן
מענשענס האַרץ, און דער וועג וועט צו זיין ברודערס האַרץ פיהרען — — —
וואַך אויף! — — —[222]

> With his eternal hand, great God will join together all the roads and paths that Loneliness has paved for human children.
> His mighty hand will uproot all the plants that have grown by the roadsides, [watered] by the endless weary wanderers' tears.
> Great God will lay a new path for man's heart, and this path will take man to his brother's heart.
> Awaken!

It is no coincidence that the style of this passage is reminiscent of the biblical prophets and in particular of Isaiah's famous vision of a future peace. Hirschbein's narrator speaks as a prophet who laments and denounces but also comforts with his messianic vision of future harmony and renewal.[223] In contradistinction to the biblical prophets, his message is not only prophetic, addressed to humanity, but also deeply personal. Salvation, "*a nay lebn af a nayer velt un nayer erd*" (a new life in a new world and a new earth), will put an end to his own exile and loneliness and will reunite him with the object of his love.[224] Thus, this work suggests no intrinsic value in moving from place to place without being rooted in any specific environment. The themes of alienation, estrangement, exceptionality, lonesomeness, and yearning that characterize

[222] Ibid., 51.

[223] Isaiah 2:3-5.

[224] Hirschbein, "Vanderer-troymen," 51.

"*Vanderer-troymen*" and its narrator's journey are the same themes that lie at the root of Hirschbein's melancholy style of travel writing.

"*Vanderer-troymen*" offers a final point of departure for considering Hirschbein's prodigious career of travel. The poem, while offering a messianic promise, is essentially fatalistic in tone, as the narrator takes no active part in bringing about the Redemption. The time and manner of the salvation are entirely at the discretion of *der groyser got* (the great God). It is, then, interesting to note Hirschbein's own record of action. Paradoxically, for the depth of dissatisfaction with culture and society and his voluminous criticism, both his life and work were characterized by fundamental political passivity. Unlike many of his colleagues and contemporaries, he did not issue any loud calls for resistance against oppression, nor did he consistently or exclusively support any specific political party. A melancholy *observer*, Hirschbein traveled around the world without ever becoming intoxicated by its endless variety and instead looking for peace and universal understanding. Accordingly, his travelogues contain passages that reveal a sense of confusion about his own purpose as a traveler. He describes experiencing a strong headache, while on a ship near the coast of Brazil, and having an imagined conversation with his inner voice:

— וואוהין פֿאהרט עם א יונגערמאן?
— אזוי זיך; בעקוקען די וועלט.
— און וואָס האָט דיר געפעהלט אין ווילנא?
— הא?
— מיינסט טאקע אז די וועלט איז אזוי גרויס און, אז פון זיך קען מען אנטלויפען?
— נייז; איך וויים שוין, אז פון זיך קען מען ניט אנטלויפען — נאָר גלאט אזוי — שיפען נעהען; שווימען פון וועלט צו וועלט...
— יא, אבער פאר וואָס געפעלט דיר ניט ווילנא?
— הא?[225]

— Where are you going, young man?
— Nowhere in particular, just to observe the world.

[225] Hirschbein, *Fun vayte lender: Argentine, Brazil; yuni-november 1914*, 171.

— And what did you lack in Vilna?
— Eh?
— Do you really think that the world is so big that one can run away from oneself?
— No, I already know that one can't run away from oneself, but even so: the ships leave, go from one world to another . . .
— Yes, but what do you dislike about Vilna?
— Eh?

The references to Vilna, where Hirschbein lived for several years prior to his arrival in America, highlight the text's autobiographic elements. Yet this confusion is not restricted to his autobiographic works. When examined collectively, Hirschbein's travelogues and letters, and other people's accounts of him convey a consistent picture of a striking ambivalence about the notion of travel and his motivation for its pursuit.

One of the clearest and most striking encapsulations of Hirschbein's lifelong engagement with the subject of travel is contained in the short essay "*Got-zukhenish*" (Search for God), which he wrote toward the end of his life. This piece itself is not a travelogue; nor does it concern itself with foreign cultures, languages, or natural landscapes. Nevertheless, the picture of humankind that it paints is crucially dependent on the implicit dichotomy between settled life and the travel-wandering-homelessness continuum, the former representing a form of existence akin to incarceration and the latter the state of ultimate freedom. In "*Got-zukhenish*," written in Los Angeles, where he lived from the early 1940s until his death in 1948, Hirschbein's creative intuition leads him to the quintessentially American figure of the hobo, or tramp—"*far vemen yeder shtot bazunder iz a tfise, er vandert tsu fus fun shtot tsu shtot un fort a mol afn dakh fun a frakhttsug*" (for whom every single city is a prison, he wanders on foot from one city to the next and sometimes travels on the roof of a freight train).[226] In a typically dreamy symbolist style,

[226] Peretz Hirschbein, "Got-zukhenish" (unpublished manuscript) (1940s): 1, PPH.

Hirschbein describes a conversation with one such person—a bearded middle-aged man with "*kindershe gliklekhe oygn*" (childish happy eyes), loitering in Los Angeles's Pershing Square. A passionate celebration of the tramp's choice to reject modern society, this essay has certain parallels to "Vanderer-troymen," even though the two works differ in their conclusions about the essence of wandering.

The tramp's lifestyle is in many respects antithetical to the notion of the traditional Jewish *gedorim* (boundaries)—and yet it also contains elements that are profoundly Jewish. The lifestyle represented by the hairy man "*vos darf afile nit keyn shtikl zeyf, makhmes er shpirt zikh reyn*" (who does not even require a piece of soap, for he feels clean) rejects many of the core elements of Judaism: family life, communal institutions, religious rules, and countless other principles and practices, including the fear of God. When analyzed from a different angle, however, Hirschbein's tramp emerges as a figure reminiscent of biblical prophets, Hassidic tzaddikim and *lamed-vovniks*, or even the Jewish Messiah. In his rejection of common social rules, the tramp is a freethinker and a rebel (*apikoyres*), yet his rebellious spiritual search links him to the ancient Jewish tradition of considering God in an intimate relationship with his chosen people, whose special mission is to bring about universal peace.

Moreover, the issue of *inescapability*, which featured in Hirschbein's earlier works in connection with antisemitism, is reinterpreted here in a more harmonious and universal version. The tramp's search for God is voluntary and is a source of his happiness, and so is his shunning of organized religion. The Jewish connotations of this combination of search and rejection are unmistakable, and have parallels in profoundly Jewish works such as Arn Tseytlin's famous poem "*Zayn a yid*" (To Be a Jew), which defines Jewishness as "*eybik loyfn tsu got, afile az m'iz an antloyfer*" (to always run toward God, even when running away) and "*nisht kenen aroys fun*

got afile az me vil es" (to not be able to leave God even when desiring it).[227] Drawing both on the halachic definition of Jewishness and on the romantic hero imagery of eternal struggle and rebellion, Tseytlin's poem can be seen as a celebration of the individualistic search for God and a spiritual rejection of the principle epitomized in the Hebrew phrase "*meshane mokem—meshane mazl*" (a change in place brings about a change in luck). Hirschbein's *gotzukher* (God seeker) is precisely an "*antloyfer*," an escaper, whose constant movement in the world is driven both by resistance and attraction, much like in the case of Hirschbein himself.

Hirschbein's tramp is emblematic of skepticism about and rejection of society across multiple domains, ideas that were shared by the author of "*Got-zukhenish*" and many of his Jewish intellectual contemporaries. First, is organized religion: "*Nit nor der mentsh fun vaytn mizrekh, nor oykh tsvishn di mentshn fun tsofn iz faran der, vos iz nit tsufridn mitn got vos zayne oves hobn far im megale geven. Der yidisher got, tsi der kristlekher bagrif fun got bafridikt im nit*."[228] (Not only the people faraway in the East, but among the people of the north there are those who are not content with the God that their ancestors discovered. Neither the Jewish God nor the Christian notion of God satisfies him.) Such religious doubt could be equally applicable to Hirschbein and to countless other secularized Jews of his generation, who rejected the faith of their fathers and the notion of the Torah's divine origin. The tramp, like many secularized Jewish socialist and communist idealists, is also uninterested in wealth and acquisition, and the idea of having "*tsen por shikh, a tsendlik ontsugn un etlekhe tuts hemder*" (ten pairs of shoes, ten suits, and a few dozen shirts) strikes him as ridiculous: "*Vorem vifl darf take hobn der mentsh vos di gantse velt geher tsu im*?" (Since how much does a person need, given that he owns the entire

[227] Irving Howe, Khone Shmeruk, and Ruth R. Wisse, eds., *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (Viking, 1987), 537.

[228] Hirschbein, "Got-zukhenish," 1–2.

world?).[229] The tramp's disavowal further pertains to political and social engagement. Like Hirschbein (but unlike many Jewish Bundists and Bolsheviks), the tramp eschews joining any political party. His is not the path of activism, of political agitation or union organizing. Rather than calling for the alleviation of such social ills as poverty and unemployment, the tramp refuses "*lebn mit dem bagrif az a kabtsn iz der vos hot nit keyn nikl af a tepele kave, tsi af a shtikl broyt*" (to live with the notion that a beggar is someone without a nickel for a cup of coffee or a piece of bread).[230] His call is not for redistribution but for a radical reevaluation of what it means to be happy. He is not, however, a prophet or a proselytizer. He does not seek an audience for his ideas about happiness. Rather, it is Hirschbein who approaches him with a serious request: "*Ikh derken on dir, az du bist a gliklekher, gleybst in got, un got kumt dir antkegn vu nor du farlangst im. Gib mir an eytse vi azoy tsu lebn*."[231] (I can see that you are a happy person, a believer in God, and that God comes to you wherever you desire him. Give me advice on how to live.) The tramp's role is essentially that of a pious hermit in a cave, to whom one comes in the hope of receiving life advice.

The tramp's success in finding God is presented as critical to his happiness and moral authority. *His* God has little to do, however, with organized religion and certainly does not adhere to the traditional Jewish interpretation. The essay puts forward a pantheistic message that privileges paganism over Judeo-Christian monotheism: "*di amolike, uralte gotzukher [vos] hobn nit gedarft kukn tsum himl*" (the ancient god seekers [who] did not need to look up to heaven) and instead found their gods in fire, water, and other natural phenomena are proclaimed the

[229] Ibid., 2.

[230] Ibid.

[231] Ibid., 4.

direct precursors of the spiritual seekers of the modern age, "*ven der mentsh vil aropvarfn fun zayn gevisn di farantvortlekhkeyt tsu a mistiryezn koyekh*" (when people want to free their conscience of the responsibility to a mysterious power). The God celebrated in this essay is every human being's potential for true freedom.

Realizing this potential requires forsaking home and communal connections, career ambitions, and political struggle. In return, one gains the ability to become a God-like being and to achieve constant happiness. The essay concludes that the bargain is an excellent one. "*Voyl iz tsu dem*" (Blessed is he), writes Hirschbein using the common biblical formula, "*vos hot got gefunen nit vayt fun zikh, nor in zayn eygn blut un bagrayft az di velt hot er aleyn bashafn*" (who found God not faraway but rather in his own blood and who understands that he himself created the world). One could, furthermore, argue that the essay communicates the vision of a worldwide community of like-minded *gotzukhers* (God seekers)—a universal brotherhood of searchers for truth, for a different way of living, for "*an oysveg*" (a way out).[232] Yet it is no usual community: it lacks a communal structure and consists of self-sufficient "gods," who are always at peace with themselves.

It is worth noting that Hirschbein does not omit the ignoble aspects of homeless life: the tramp eats oranges out of a trash can and asks his new acquaintance for some change, "*makhmes er iz geven shtark hungerik*" (because he was very hungry).[233] Yet none of the practical challenges associated with this lifestyle negate the divine status the essay ascribes to the homeless man: "*Keyner, keyner ken ba dem got-mentshn gornisht tsunemen. Er iz der got un er*

[232] Ibid., 1.

[233] Ibid., 5.

hot di velt bashafn."[234] (Nobody can ever take anything away from the God-Person. He is God and the world's creator.) If anything, the few coins that he receives elevate him further: he becomes equivalent to a Hassidic rebbe, whom one approaches with utmost reverence, carrying a sum of money *af tsedoke* (as charity).

Hirschbein's reflections in "*Got-zukhenish*" come into greater focus when placed in the context of broader discourse within modern Jewish culture about the problem of finding moral and spiritual foundations in the "godless" era of modernity. In his 1947 poem "*Mayn vogl-bruder*" (My Wander Brother), American Yiddish poet Yankev Glatstein imagines God as his companion in wandering—both the physical movement from one country to another and the intellectual and spiritual wandering caused by the speaker's having "*gevaremt di shrekedike beyner bam fayertop fun visn*" (warmed the frightened bones at the fire pot of knowledge): "*durkh yaboshes un yamen veln mir shoyn azoy blondzhen un blondzhen tsuzamen*" (through dry land and seas we will always keep wandering together). Various versions of the *gotzukher* figure became a fitting image for the often disoriented and disillusioned Jewish atheists, skeptics, and agnostics. It is striking how many parallels can be found between Hirschbein's "*Got-zukhenish*" and Isaac Bashevis Singer's lecture delivered three decades later in front of a Yiddish-speaking audience in Montreal:

> *Iber di khurves fun materyalizm un iber di khurves fun religyezn dogmatism shvebt vider der gayst fun religye. A nayer religyezetet vakst oys: nisht geboyt af neviim, af shlikhim fun got . . . . Der religyezer denker fun der itstiker tsayt halt az vi bald got kumt nisht tsum mentsh, muz der mentsh kumen tsu got. Mir muzn <u>zukhn got</u> af dem zelbn shteyger, vi mir zukhn <u>di natur-gezetsn un di natur-oytsres</u>. In keyn shum tsayt hobn denkendike mentshn nisht azoy gezukht got vi in undzer haynt.*[235]

[234] Ibid.

[235] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Di filosofye fun a yidishn shrayber" (audio recording), public lecture at the 56th Annual Meeting of the Jewish Public Library of Montreal, Canada (May 9, 1971).

> Over the ruins of materialism and religious dogmatism the spirit of religion is once again hovering. A new religiosity is arising: one that is not built on prophets, on messengers of God . . . . Today's religious thinker concludes that since God does not come to man, man must go to God. We must search for God in the same way that we search for natural laws and natural resources. At no other time have thinking people searched for God as much as today.

Singer's lecture both affirms and expands on the message of Hirschbein's essay. Rather than turning to such "extreme" examples as the homeless man in Pershing Square, Singer argues that *got-zukheray* (God-searching)—however one interprets the term "God"—is characteristic of most "*denkendike mentshn*" (thinking people), which, presumably, includes himself and other intellectuals, both Jews and Gentiles. The void left by the abandonment of "*religyezer dogmatizm*" (religious dogmatism) and "*shalikhim fun got*" (messengers of God), Singer argues, must be filled with a new essence that produces both a sense of freedom and new moral boundaries lest one be left with the conviction that the world is completely *hefker* (lawless, without divine supervision)—a notion that Singer refused to accept.

While Singer's evocation of nature went hand in hand with his well-known interest in the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza and in other attempts to reinterpret the notion of God and the relationship between God and humanity, a topic that was typical of secular Yiddish literature as a whole, Hirschbein's prioritization of nature and reinterpretation of divinity were different both in style and in essence. Compared to Singer's spirited call to humanize religion, the final message in Hirschbein's "*Got-zukhenish*," its apparently more positive tone notwithstanding, is unexpectedly pessimistic. In fact, it is considerably more pessimistic than Hirschbein's own "*Vanderer-troymen*," written over three decades earlier. While the narrator of "*Vanderer-troymen*" perceives wandering as a form of suffering and longs for the Redemption, when all roads, which push people apart, will be erased, "*Got-zukhenish*," on the other hand, suggests that the only solution is to relinquish all attempts to improve the world through active engagement.

Although the encounter with the Californian hobo has supposedly helped the narrator gain a deeper understanding into the secret of individual happiness, the recipe suggested here is unrealistic even for the narrator himself. Nor is there any suggestion in the text that such a *universal brotherhood* would reach beyond a few voluntary outcasts on the margins of society.

The message conveyed in "*Got-zukhenish*" is key to understanding much of Hirschbein's travel writing. What truly matters to this writer, traveler, and seeker is not the geographic but rather the ethical. One leaves home out of dissatisfaction with one's own society, but wherever one goes, one discovers the same problems stemming from the inherent qualities of human nature. As links are added to the chain of departures, one's only chance is to transform this chronic state of homelessness into one's home, to belong *everywhere* by belonging *nowhere*, to possess *everything* by possessing *nothing*. Yet, paradoxically, Hirschbein's works repeatedly convey the idea that this type of home can never bring true happiness. Therein lies the central conflict of his literary universe in general and his travel writing in particular: the sadness about the loss of cultural and communal strength combined with a deeply individualistic outlook and an instinctive aversion to social, political, cultural, or religious encroachments on nature and on personal freedom.

Chapter 3.

From Redem to Singapore: Melech Ravitch's Search for "Cosmic Grandiosity"

Before launching into his official Nobel lecture, Isaac Bashevis Singer announced that he would speak briefly in Yiddish, "because no one has ever spoken Yiddish here…and only God knows if anyone is going to speak Yiddish here again."[236] The audience greeted the celebrated Yiddish writer's idea with passionate applause. Thus far Singer's gesture was a moving statement of loyalty to his native tongue, and through it, to its speakers, both dead and alive, including the majority of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. In his speech, Singer acted as a lonely representative of a world nearly gone. Yet the lecture's final conclusion conveyed a view of Yiddish as something infinitely more significant and relevant than an endangered minority language, and it did so by presenting the very vulnerability of Yiddish as a unique source of strength. "In a figurative way," Singer suggested, speaking in his thickly accented English, "Yiddish is the wise and humble language of us all, the idiom of frightened and hopeful humanity." Despite Singer's focus on humility, his image of Yiddish was perhaps more grandiose than humble: according to him, Yiddish had qualities that not only made it a legitimate medium for a Nobel Prize-winning author but rendered it capable of serving as a universal symbol, a moral Esperanto of sorts. Presumably, Yiddish earned this right due to the special nature of the twentieth century's relationship with tragedy, confusion, and regeneration, which the Jewish case so prominently reflected.

Singer belonged to a generation of Jews who rejected the insular lifestyle of their parents and bravely entered the world of non-Jewish European culture. They came with an enormous

[236] Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Nobel Lecture* (Stockholm; Dec 8, 1978), accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1978/singer-lecture.html.

baggage of history and national themes, but with a limited legacy of modern literary work in Yiddish, and with a sense of alienation and of "falling between two stools". This very sense of alienation, so characteristic of twentieth-century culture in general—with its wars, crisis of colonialism, and growing globalization—became the central focus of Yiddish literature. Singer was able to explore these themes through the Jewish characters in his short stories and novels, many of them immigrants and exiles—maladjusted and traumatized—and to do so to great acclaim from non-Jewish readers. Singer's task was to preserve his linguistic and cultural specificity and authenticity, but also to succeed in making his texts relevant to people outside the world of Yiddish. A secular Yiddish intellectual's impulse to be part of the wider world, which went all the way back to that initial rejection of one's parents' traditional lifestyle, had to be balanced with the need to find one's bearings as a modern Jew, and as a Jewish and Yiddish writer. The mere pursuit of *otherness* without the ability to eventually define one's own position left one exposed to the real danger of experiencing a creative and personal identity crisis.

What Singer proposed for Yiddish, Melech Ravitch (1893–1976) proposed for the Yiddish travelogue. In contrast to his older colleague Peretz Hirschbein, Ravitch consistently presented the worldwide Jewish dispersion as a creative opportunity. His travel writing in particular is permeated with intellectual and aesthetic curiosity, a desire to celebrate the world's cultural variety and apparent inconsistencies, and a great regard for originality. As an author, Ravitch seems to have never quite found his own natural genre and form, remaining something of a nomad in that regard as well. To the extent that he did settle on certain genres, the travelogue form was certainly among his favorites and for a good reason. Writing travelogues allowed Ravitch to turn his restlessness and rootlessness into advantages by treating them as powerful symbols both of the Jewish experience and of creativity.

While Ravitch admits that the ubiquity of travel-related themes in Jewish culture and the Jew's position as *"der Ahasver fun der velt"* (the world's Ahasuerus, i.e. the Wandering Jew) might have been an obstacle to the development of a full-fledged and distinct tradition of travel writing, he is far from implying that the Yiddish travelogue is therefore deficient and inferior to its counterparts in other languages. On the contrary, he reinterprets the "obstacle" of homelessness into something like an advantage, or, at the very least, a source of uniqueness. As was the case with many of his fellow Yiddish travelers, Ravitch presents his powerful wanderlust as a dream that began in his earliest childhood—almost as if it were an inborn quality that one received by virtue of belonging to Yiddish culture and consequently experiencing the effects of the peculiar tension between the curse of *goles* (exile) and the blessing of "*Ashreykho Yisroel*" (Blessed are you, O Israel). Likewise, he proclaims the travelogue to be the very essence of Yiddish literature: "*A paradoks ben paradoks: az undzer gantse literatur iz nisht epes andersh vi nor rayze-literatur. Mir gefinen zikh in a permanentn rayze-tsushtand*" (A remarkable paradox, namely that our entire literature is nothing other than travel literature. We are in a permanent state of travel).[237] Thus, the uniqueness of Jewish experience becomes the reason for its representative potential for modernity—indeed quite a paradox. Furthermore, by declaring all writing in Yiddish to be travel literature, Ravitch elevates both the status of Yiddish literature and his own position. As travel writing primarily examines such themes, it follows that Yiddish travel literature (and Melech Ravitch, as its foremost representative) is in the best position to explore modernity.

This is not to say that such discussions are unique to Yiddish literature. "Travel writing is, I think, coeval with writing itself," American writer Nicholas Delbanco recently wrote. He

[237] Niger and Elkin 106.

goes on to enumerate some of the most important texts of Western literature, including *The Odyssey*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Don Quixote*, and even large sections of the Bible, arguing that their "common denominator […] is near-constant motion."[238] Still, in his postulation of Yiddish literature's nomadic essence, Ravitch was participating in the internal debate among Yiddish writers and literary critics on the significance of the geographic and cultural instability of Yiddish literature. It is worth noting that not everyone was eager to celebrate this instability with the same unreserved keenness. H. D. Nomberg, known for his incisive and independent opinions, describes the Jewish dispersion as both a blessing and a curse: "*Fun a midber-sheyvet ba di bregn fun mitlendishn yam, durkh Shpanye, Frankraykh, Daytshland, biz tsu di vayse shneyen in tsofn. Vosere farshidnkeytn! S'iz undzer raykhkeyt un oremkeyt tsuzamen*" (From being a desert tribe on the shores of the Mediterranean, through Spain, France, and Germany, and all the way to the white snow in the north. What variety! It's both our richness and our poverty).[239] Nomberg's statement refers to more than just literature: it describes Yiddish culture in general, and how it has been shaped by the geographic vicissitudes of Jewish history. Although Nomberg's description has some romantic elements, the point he is making here is quite sober: Jewish culture's diversity and universal scope came at the heavy price of rootlessness and homelessness. Nomberg's position is explicitly secular; he is speaking as a modern Yiddish intellectual who can no longer contend himself with the notions of a unifying religious heritage and metaphysical mission but longs instead for some of the empowering stability of the non-Jewish cultures around him.

[238] Nicholas Delbanco, "Anywhere Out of This World: On Why All Writing Is Travel Writing," *Harper's Magazine*.

[239] Nomberg 1928 (Amerike), 68.

Although there were other prolific Yiddish travel writers, Hirschbein and Ravitch remained unmatched in their literary prominence and productivity, geographic diversity, as well as the significance of travel themes to their overall literary careers. Not only that, but it was specifically Peretz Hirschbein who inspired Melech Ravitch's first long journey: it was a case of influence, emulation, and, to an extent, even direct completion. The two men belonged, in large part, to the same cultural milieu, and their travelogues had significant geographic overlaps and many stylistic similarities. There are, however, undeniable differences of upbringing and personality; and their respective solutions—both riddled with deep contradictions—to the dilemma of exclusivity versus universalism. Hirschbein and Ravitch are thus interesting case studies to illustrate both the broad range and the inherent limitations and inconsistencies of Yiddish travel literature of the interwar period.

When discussing his own involvement with travel writing, Ravitch, although only thirteen years Hirschbein's junior, describes his older colleague as a father figure, claiming that, while the basic skill of "*geyn iber der velt*" (walk the world) was taught to him by his mother, the higher art of "*forn iber der velt*" (travel the world) was imparted to him by Hirschbein.[240] In his memoir, Ravitch recalls a conversation with Hirschbein in Warsaw in the late 1920s, which he credits with changing his life. After listening to Ravitch's complaints of restlessness—"*raytndik af bukhhalterishe shtuln un sekretarishe benklekh*" (riding on chairs typical of accountants and secretaries)—Hirschbein encouraged him to cast off all doubts and pursue his dream of traveling around the world.[241]

[240] Ravitch, *Mayn leksikon: yidishe shraybers, kinstlers, aktyorn, oykh klal-tuers in di Amerikes un andere lender*, 4 (book 1):204.

[241] Ibid., 4 (book 1):201.

Written years after Hirschbein's passing, Ravitch's account of that scene was hardly an attempt to enhance his own status by underscoring his literary *yikhes* (lineage). Nevertheless, Ravitch's acknowledgement of his great debt to Hirschbein does contain an element of apology in response to any potential charges of imitation. Indeed, the issue of rivalry is raised directly, when Ravitch expresses his conviction that "*di vundelerlekhe eydlkeyt fun Perets Hirshbeyn hot keyn mol nit tsugelozn dem gedank fun 'konkurents'*" (the wonderful gentleness of Peretz Hirschbein never permitted the thought of "competition").[242] After all, Ravitch did follow his mentor's footsteps, visiting many of the same cities and people. Moreover, his descriptions of those cities contain similar themes and imagery. Consider Hirschbein's description of his first impression of Australia's largest city, Sydney, in the early 1920s: "*Gants energish trogn zikh di mentshn in di gasn fun tsenter shtot. Di gasn shtromen mit lebn*."[243] (People on the streets in the city center are moving with great energy. The streets are buzzing with life.) More than a decade later, Ravitch's travelogue of Australia offers a strikingly similar depiction: "*[B]avegung—dos iz der ershter ayndruk. Do rut men nisht*."[244] (Movement—this is the first impression. People here don't rest.) Beyond these similarities, which might be dismissed as superficial and inconsequential, the two writers also share something much more fundamental.

By the mid-1930s, Hirschbein and Ravitch were the two most prolific and widely known representatives of a particular type of Yiddish travel writing. Theirs was not the only type of Yiddish travel writing, and it had its detractors, particularly among those who preferred the less introspective approach exemplified by Khaim Shoshkes. It is ironic that much of the negative

[242] Ibid., 4 (book 1):202.

[243] Hirschbein, *Arum der velt (rayze-ayndrukn): 1920-1922*, 74.

[244] Meylekh Ravitch, *Iber Oystralye* (Warsaw: Kinder-fraynd, 1937), 58.

criticism of their literary style was focused precisely on those features that make their travelogues especially relevant today. A highly favorable review of Khaim Shoshkes's *Ekzotishe rayzes* (1938) provides an example of how the literary style of his two main "competitors" was perceived and dismissed:

> *Perets Hirshbeyn, Meylekh Ravitsh shraybn ontsiend. Ober in zeyere shilderungen iz oft mol tsu veynik bashraybungen un tsu fil digresyes, batrakhtungen fun algemeynem kharakter, bikhlal sfeykes fun a yidishn inteligent, fun yidishn mentshn, velkher ken keyn mol nisht fargesn, az er iz a yid ud"gl. . . . far a mentshn, velkher vil visn "vos gikher" vos der rayznder zet eygnartikes, kharakteristishes—ken es a mol zayn langvaylik.*[245]
>
> Peretz Hirschbein [and] Melech Ravitch write in an engaging manner. Yet their accounts often have too few descriptions and too many digressions, general reflections, and the miscellaneous ponderings of a Jewish intellectual and a Jewish man who can never forget about his Jewishness, and so on. . . . For someone who wants to learn "as soon as possible" about the things that the traveler found to be original and characteristic, this [manner of writing] can at times be boring.[246]

Accordingly, the reviewer expresses his preference for Shoshkes, who, he argues, "*gehert tsu di shrayber, vos bashraybn kimat oysshlislekh dos vos zey zeen un hern*" (belongs to those writers who describe almost exclusively that which they see and hear).[247] It is worth noting that the review, in its lavish praise for Shoshkes's journalistic style and supposed objectivity, presents a somewhat skewed picture of the writers' differences by failing to recognize Shoshkes's own inclusion of personal contemplations, including ones about his Jewish identity. Furthermore, the accusation that Hirschbein and Ravitch fail to provide their readers with detailed accounts of their experiences is not entirely justified, as their travelogues do contain a fair amount of

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[245] Leynendik, LB 1938.

[246] Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, Russian, and German are my own.

[247] Hirsh Abramovitsh, "Leyenendik: D"r Kh. Shoshkes — ekzotishe rayzes...," *Literarishe bleter* no. 38 (749) (1938): 632.

information pertaining to the geography, demographics, and economy of the countries they had visited.

These caveats notwithstanding, the reviewer makes an apt distinction between the two styles. Unlike Shoshkes, whose work was almost exclusively limited to travel writing, both Hirschbein and Ravitch were accomplished writers in other genres as well, including poetry. Hirschbein's earliest works included Hebrew lyrical poems, and his later Yiddish dramas had many poetic elements. Ravitch, likewise, had begun his writing career as a poet, and, while he later also produced countless essays and memoiristic works, poetry remained central to his literary creativity and persona. Neither Hirschbein nor Ravitch had much interest in writing practical travel guides or geographic dictionary entries. Nor did they aim to pander to the public's usual keenness for sensationalism. Instead, they sought in the travelogue genre the possibility of poetic self-expression, political and cultural analysis, philosophical meditations, and identity exploration. What makes these travelogues valuable—the clearest window on their internal lives and identities as Jews, artists, and interwar intellectuals—is attacked here, because the review's author is interested in facts and explains his preference expressed for the more neutral and less introspective Shoshkes. He is still in the era of thirst for knowledge of desire to experience vicariously other reality, and his reference to *"sfeykes fun a yidishn inteligent"* ("the doubts of a Jewish intellectual") is suggestive of something akin to contempt.

Writing about his relationship with Hirschbein provides Ravitch with an opportunity to not only express his admiration for the writer who once inspired him to become a world traveler but to also examine his own manner of travel writing, namely the subjective approach of "*durkhoys perzenlekhe impresyes un meditatsyes af dem fon fun lender un felker*" (thoroughly

personal impressions and meditations against a backdrop of countries and peoples).[248] Ravitch extols the *introspective and impressionistic* travelogue in which the bare facts are less important than the author's inner musings. This insistence on the unquestionable primacy of subjectivity in his literary work, to the point of capriciousness, was a characteristic feature of Ravitch's literary persona and sometimes led to heated disputes. Ravitch was accused of being a fervent worshipper of *der alter ego* (a word play on the Latin term *alter ego*, which in Yiddish also literally means "the old ego"), and of failing to support his comrades in their political and literary struggles.[249] In an open letter to Ravitch, the influential Bundist leader Yoysef Lestshinski, widely known under the pseudonym Y. Khmurner, challenged Ravitch's *art-for-art's-sake* attitude as irresponsible; he argued that complete artistic freedom and independence were impossibilities in any society, let alone in one facing serious threats and deep divisions as was the case in interwar Poland. Lestshinski remonstrated, "*Zingt den der 'frayster' dikhter oyser tsayt un roym?*" (Does even the "freest" poet sing outside of time and space?).[250]

Ravitch remained unperturbed by such encroachments on his writerly independence and accusations of inconsistency, subjectivity, and self-involvement, insisting on his right to be unconventional. Again and again, he named literary genuineness and enjoyment as his chief allies and boredom, his main foe. When his review of Anna Margolin's poetry collection was condemned for inordinate attention to himself as the reviewer, Ravitch retorted by mocking the conventional, "professorial" method of writing about literature and reminded his detractors that

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[248] Ravitch, *Mayn leksikon: yidishe shraybers, kinstlers, aktyorn, oykh klal-tuers in di Amerikes un andere lender*, 4 (book 1):202.

[249] Khayem-Shloyme Kazdan, "A vort kegn un a vort vegn der 'Folkstsaytung far literatur': a briv tsum kh' Meylekh Ravitsh," *Folkstsaytung (W)* (January 31, 1930): 9.

[250] Yankev Leshtshinski, "Frayhayt fun vort un klorkeyt fun gedank: an entfer dem kh' Meylekh Ravitsh," *Folkstsaytung (W)* (August 6, 1926): 4.

his review had helped generate great interest in Margolin's book. Ravitch expressed scorn for writing "*vi an universitet-profesor, un azoy farlangvaylikn di verter, az men zol genetsn bald ba di ershte por zatsn un ba di letste lakhlutn khropen*" (like a university professor, making the words so boring as to make the reader immediately yawn during the first couple of sentences and have him deeply snoring by the last ones).[251] This rejection of boredom, blandness, and unoriginality helps to explain many of his artistic choices and the eagerness with which he embraced travel writing.

Whether or not Ravitch fully believed in the unique power of Yiddish travel writing for dealing with the fundamental issues of modernity, the subject of identity played a central role throughout his entire career and never let him rest. When it comes to the problem of self-definition, Ravitch and Hirschbein, represent two contrasting approaches As discussed in the previous chapter, Hirschbein's intellectual and artistic priorities, while guiding his exploration and shaping his perception of different places and people, did not necessarily ascribe much value to itinerancy per se or celebrate the notion of travel for travel's sake. Ravitch's writings, on the other hand, convey a sense of emptiness that urgently needs to be filled, with as much diversity as possible, suggesting in effect that this particular seeker is not fully sure of what it is that he is seeking (or perhaps does not believe that this is a question worth asking). Hence the occasional accusations of pretentiousness and narcissism leveled against Ravitch by critics and hence his own monologue of dissatisfaction. Still, Ravitch is guided by a genuine urge to make the most of his travels in order to collect, arrange, and organize knowledge and experiences that only a short time ago seemed completely inaccessible and fairy-tale-like.

[251] Kazdan, "A vort kegn un a vort vegn der 'Folkstsaytung far literatur': a briv tsum kh' Meylekh Ravitsh."

For both Ravitch and Hirschbein, travel writing is a powerful tool for the exploration of their individual, communal, and national identity. While their literary legacies have much in common, their respective interpretations of Jewish universalism are strikingly different. Hirschbein's meditative focus on the human need for peace, moral integrity, and cultural authenticity—expressed with particular clarity in his discussions of *got-zukhenish*—is the opposite of Ravitch's passionate celebration of cultural variety. Hirschbein treats the eternal Jewish wanderer as a tragic, even if at times romantic, figure, whereas Ravitch embraces the same condition of homelessness with the full passion of his intellectual curiosity, taking pride in Yiddish literature's uniquely convenient position for imbibing and creatively transforming the world's cultural tapestry.

In order to understand the difference between these two approaches, it is helpful to look at a Yiddish poet closely associated with Hirschbein, who was also an important literary figure in her own right, namely his wife, Esther Hirschbein-Shumiatcher. An enlightening literary relationship emerges between Shumiatcher and Ravitch, in which these two distinct attitudes manifest themselves with a striking intensity. As Shumiatcher left no prose travelogues, it is especially useful to compare her poetry to Ravitch's own poetic works.

If one is to believe her correspondence, Shumiatcher was not the main initiator of their journeys. Her letters to Opatoshu contain hints at her occasional weariness from having to follow her indefatigable husband around the world: "*Zayt a guter, Opatoshu, un shraybt a briv mit a sakh nayes. Mir zenen azoy opgerisn fun undzere un benken azoy tsu hern fun undzer eygenem vinkl*" (Be good, Opatoshu, write a letter with a lot of news. We are so isolated from our friends and long so much to hear from our own corner).[252] Opatoshu responded with a letter urging

[252] Shumiatcher.

Shumiatcher and Hirschbein to come back to America: "*Libe Etl, vi lang iz der shier zikh arumtsushlepn iber der velt?*" (Dear Etl, how long can one wander around the world?)[253] Yet according to Shumiatcher's letters, determining the return date was hardly up to her. She admits that she often thinks about it but explains there is no way of knowing whether her husband's wanderlust "*vet ven nit iz geshtilt vern"* (will ever be quenched).[254] Despite the wife's occasional weariness, the couple obviously shared a common passion for exploring the world. What they also had in common was the tendency to be less interested in celebrating the exoticism for its own sake than in deploring the moral challenges and dangers faced by humanity.

Twenty years her husband's junior, Esther Shumiatcher became one of the best-traveled women in Yiddish literary circles. She began writing poetry in Yiddish under her husband's influence and soon became an author in her own right, with independent poetic imagery and themes. Not that she was ever able to free herself from the gendered view of her male colleagues and readers, both admirers and detractors. Sholem Asch praised her as "*eyne fun undzere shenste un noblste vort-kinstler*" (one of our best and noblest word artists), whose poetic rhythm is "*a meydlsher un a reyner, vi er volt aroysgekumen fun a tsniesdiker neshome fun undzere alte bobes*" (maidenish and pure, as if it came directly from the [piously] modest soul of our old grandmothers), while Opatoshu asserted that "*ba keyn yidisher dikhterin hob ikh nisht bagegnt aza farnem un aza otem*" (in no other Yiddish poetess have I encountered such scope and such breath).[255] Given that she wrote much of her poetry while traveling around the world, it should not come as a surprise that her foreign experiences had a profound impact on her work.

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[253] Joseph Opatoshu, Letter to Ester Shumiatcher ([May?] 1927), PPH (Folder 73).

[254] Shumiatcher.

[255] Sholem Asch, Letter to Ester Shumiatcher (Oct 14, 1944), PPH (Folder 73).

Shumiatcher was not a travel writer—if what one means by travel writing is the recording of one's travel impression in prose. And, even if one were to consider poetry as one possible form for a travelogue, it would still be hard to make a case for the full inclusion of Shumiatcher's work under the rubric of travel writing. She was undoubtedly a *traveling* poet but not always a *travel* poet in the sense parallel to the notion of a *travel writer*—as the mere condition of itinerancy does not necessarily result in one's observations of foreignness becoming the central subject of one's writing. And yet it is precisely because of her liminal position in Yiddish travel literature that analysis of Shumiatcher's work itself and the perception of her poetry by others is pertinent here. Such analysis is helpful for determining the boundaries of the travelogue genre, the general effect of travel on writing, and the role of travel in the Yiddish literary community.

Shumiatcher's first poetry collection, *Shoen fun libshaft* (Hours of Love, 1930), was in many ways a reflection of the travel experiences she had had with her husband, and its publication was an important event in the history of Yiddish women's poetry. Shumiatcher's poetry bears many similarities to the travel writing of Hirschbein, both in its tone and subject matter, although the speaker in many of her poems has an explicitly feminine voice. Even those of her poems that do not specifically focus on travel often contain references and allusions to her worldwide experience. Like her husband, she introduced the theme of an unreachable *land of peace*: "*in der goldener fremd / Ligt a zunik land ba a gildenem breg*" (in the golden foreign places lies a sunny country by a golden shore).[256] The tone of much of her poetry is serious and often sad, at times permeated with a sense of outright tragedy, as in the poem "Tsigayner" (A Gypsy), informed by the romantic imagery of Gypsy wandering:

[256] Ester Shumiatcher, *In shoen fun libshaft: lider un poemes* (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1930), 29.

האָב איך מיין האַנט וועגעבן צו לייענען מיין מזל
אַ פלינקער טאָכטער פונעם ווינט,
האָט זי בריט צעשמייכלט זיך און בריט געלאַכט:
– אַך, דו, פויגעלע, דו, טייבעלע, דו, פלינקע שוואַלבע!
האָסט אַ פליענדע נשמה און אַ ווייטע האַרץ,
וואָס ברענט און צינדט.
און האָסט דעם טויט נישט איינמאָל שוין געקוקט אין אויגן.[257]

I gave my hand to be told my fortune
By a swift daughter of the winds,
She smiled widely and burst out laughing:
O you, little bird, you, little dove, you, swift swallow!
You have a swift soul and a white heart,
Which burns and kindles.
And you've faced death more than once.

Characteristically, both the fortuneteller and the speaker are female, and both are described using the same adjective "*flink*" (quick), which further underlines the strong affinity between them. This deeply personal poem has no explicit discussion of politics, history, or anything specifically Jewish. And yet, even here, the subject of wandering and the deep questions associated with it are at the center.

In its geographic scope and image diversity, Shumiatcher's 1930 book was also an unparalleled achievement in Yiddish poetry. "*S'iz der ershter pruv in yidisher poezye durkhtsuvarfn a binyen iber ale veltteyln*" (It's the first attempt in Yiddish poetry to erect a building across all continents), wrote Opatoshu, stressing the book's novelty.[258] Yet not everyone was satisfied with it. The criticisms often contained elements of gender stereotypes, as in Zalman Shneur's opinion that Shumiatcher's possession of "*a sakh harts un veynik verter*" (a lot of heart and few words) was "*ir khisorn un ir mayle*" (her flaw and her advantage).[259] The one aspect of

[257] Ibid., 66.

[258] Joseph Opatoshu, Letter to Ester Shumiatcher (Jan 20, 1931), PPH (Folder 73).

[259] Ester Shumiatcher, *Lider* (Los Angeles: Ester Shumyatsher-bukh-komitet, 1956), 11.

Shumiatcher's poetry that Shneur finds unequivocally stimulating and worthy of attention is the impact that her travels had on her writing. He argues that "*ekzotishe motivn, bagegenishn un rayzes vos Ester hot gemakht kimat in ale teyln fun der velt zaynen ba ir nit gegangen farlorn* (exotic motifs, encounters and journeys that Esther had in nearly every part of the world were not wasted on her)."[260] Thus, Shneur's desire for greater concreteness of image and thought—along the lines of T.S. Eliot's rejection of the Romantics—did not merely reflect his perception of women's poetry but was also a commentary on the exceptional nature of Shumiatcher's travel experiences and what he saw as their largely "unrealized potential" for literary creativity.

Melech Ravitch, who, under the influence of Shumiatcher's husband, had by that time become an accomplished traveler and travel writer in his own right, clearly agreed with Shneur's assessment, and, in a sharply critical review, went even further. Whatever their value for understanding the work of Shumiatcher, Ravitch's objections and quibbles provide an enlightening perspective on his own contribution to both the theory and practice of Yiddish travel literature. Ravitch's criticism focused on what he argued was the *missed opportunity* for a *geographical* poetry book. For Shumiatcher, the subject of travel was merely one theme out of many, whereas Ravitch aspired to turn it into a leitmotif and an organizing principle. In its harshness, Ravitch's review was a characteristic display of his uncompromising desire to follow his creative intuition for self-expression without sparing anyone—least of all himself. Nearly a year and a half later, Ravitch still finds it necessary to make implicitly apologetic references to his attack on *Shoen fun libshaft*: "*Ikh kush aykh, mayne tayere, […] – un fargest itst, tayere Ester, mayn retsenzye – ikh kush aykh di gute hent*" (I kiss you, my dear, […]—and forget now,

[260] Ibid.

dear Ester, my review—I kiss your good hands).[261] Whether kisses were in this case the most effective way of achieving a reconciliation is a subject for a different study.

In his characteristic manner, for which he was so often criticized, Ravitch opens his review of Shumiatcher's book in a highly playful and personal (or, as his detractors would have said, *self-centered*) tone: in the form of a written-down conversation between the female poet and himself. There is every reason to assume that he based it on a conversation that had actually taken place, but even if it had not, what one has here is an enlightening presentation of two approaches to creative engagement with travel. One approach is advocated by Ravitch as the correct one, while the other one is what he concludes was and remained Shumiatcher's style—incorrigible as she is. Ravitch's desire is for her to use her talent to take advantage of her unique experience: "*Ir hot durkhgevandert di velt. In ayere lider vet zayn der otem fun der gantser velt. Shoyn dos aleyn git aykh a gevisn forrekht far andere yunge dikhter. Nisht ale yidishe dikhter hobn gehat aza vunderlekh mazl*" (You've traveled the world. In your poems will be the breath of the entire world. This alone gives you a certain advantage over other young poets. Not every Yiddish poet has been so lucky).[262] There is an important difference between the two philosophies of writing: while Ravitch begins from the outside, Shumiatcher is guided by her own inner experiences. Her poetry is consistent in its emphasis on conveying the poet's intimate feelings, rather than "taking advantage" of this or that external circumstance for the sake of broadening the literal and metaphoric horizons of Yiddish poetry.

According to Ravitch, Shumiatcher rejected his "*khaverishe meynung*" (friendly opinion) to structure her book geographically; the way this rejection is phrased is clearly meant to convey

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[261] Meylekh Ravitch, Letter to Peretz Hirschbein (August 1, 1933), PPH (Folder 98).

[263] Meylekh Ravitch, "A farshleyerte dikhterin iz durkhgeforn di gantse velt: Ester Shumyatshers lider," *Vokhnshrift* 2, no. 10 (60) (March 4, 1932): 2, 8.

the image of a stubborn young woman with an oversupply of feeling and perhaps a slight deficit of cold intellect: "*Fu, vi nisht dikhterish! Ir rat mir tsu makhn a geografish lernbukh in gramen…*" (Feh, how unpoetic! You advise me to write a rhymed geographic textbook.) However, Ravitch's review does not stay on this predictable and uninteresting level; rather, using the metaphor of a veil, Ravitch makes an ingenious case for the superiority of his approach to writing, against both Shumiatcher and, by extension, her husband, Peretz Hirschbein. According to Ravitch, the main source of their disagreement has to do with the question of how the poet should relate to the "*shleyer*" (veil) that "*hengt iber ale zakhn in der velt*" (hovers over everything in the world). She thinks that "*di ufgabe fun dem dikhter iz nor mit keylim ontsurirn dos fremde un nisht mit di hent*" (the poet's task is to touch the foreign with his instruments only and not with his hands); he, on the other hand, is convinced that the true goal should be "*aroptsuraysn*" (to tear it down) by calling things (and places) by their proper names and organizing the material in a way that would be accessible to a wide readership. This is precisely why he wanted her to group her poems in "*geografishe tsiklen, Khine tsu Khine, Yapan tsu Yapan*" (geographic cycles, China with China, Japan with Japan) that would "*ilustrirn di landshaftn un felkershaftn*" (illustrate the landscapes and peoples).[263] Ironically, although characteristically for Ravitch's reviews, even in admitting that Shumiatcher's book did not follow his recommendations, Ravitch in a sense still ascribes an important role to himself, by claiming that "*oysgenutst zenen gevorn yene eytses farkert. [….] Epes azoy vi spetsyel tsu reytsn zikh mit der geografye*" (those recommendations were used in the opposite way. [….] As if with the explicit intention to make fun of geography). In his opinion, this lack of geographic consistency, "*brengt a gvaldikn shodn*" (causes great harm) in this otherwise promising book

[263] Meylekh Ravitch, "A farshleyerte dikhterin iz durkhgeforn di gantse velt: Ester Shumyatshers lider," *Vokhnshrift* 2, no. 10 (60) (March 4, 1932): 2, 8.

with poems "*fun Vilne biz Yerusholaim, fun Buenos-Ayres biz Yohanesburg*" (from Vilna to Jerusalem, from Buenos Aires to Johannesburg).[264] Once again, what Ravitch argues against are essentially some of the qualities stereotypically associated with "feminine" writing; namely "excessive sentimentality" and the lack of sufficient rigor, logic, and concreteness. The lines from her poems that he selects for praise in his review are those which he thinks exhibit these qualities, as is made clear by his comments on Shumiatcher's poem about Jerusalem: "*di dikhterin zet ot di alte shtot konkret mit di oygn fun haynt. Zi derzet dos, vos es varft zikh in di oygn un nisht dos, vos es filt dos harts*" (the poetess sees this old city concretely through modern eyes. She discerns what stands out visually and not what the heart feels).[265] As is hinted in this review, there was little chance of Shumiatcher's changing her "eye-to-heart" ratio under Ravitch's pressure. In any case, when it came to literary advice, there was someone much closer to her, not just physically and emotionally, but also aesthetically—her own husband Peretz Hirschbein whom she trusted and who would undoubtedly have sided with her.

Ravitch never attacked Hirschbein the way he attacked Hirschbein's wife, but through his criticisms of her, he also indirectly spoke of her husband. There is enough in what he wrote directly about Hirschbein to see that the criticism was partially similar. In 1928, on the occasion of Hirschbein's arrival in Warsaw, Ravitch wrote that Yiddish literature was blessed to have Hirschbein, but was also blessed not to be defined by Hirschbein's individual outlook: "*vos tragik un troyer un pesimizm iz zayn vezn*" (whose essence are tragedy, mourning, and pessimism), and whose work is, above all, a reminder that nothing is stronger than "*di ru un der*

[264] Ibid.

[265] Ibid.

toyt" (peace and death). [266] As I. B. Singer once said, acknowledging Kafka's greatness, "one Kafka in a century is enough."[267] Ravitch is not quite as categorical, but the implication is similar. It is striking how Ravitch decides to offer an imitation of Hirschbein's style, using some of its most serious traits, and it is uniquely helpful for understanding how Hirschbein's style was perceived at the time. "*Ikh vel redn mit zayn stil*" (I will speak in his style), suggests Ravitch, while discussing the fact that wherever he would travel he would be retracing Hirschbein's steps, offering the following sentence—in a friendly but also mischievous "impersonation" of his colleague's style: "*zayne shpurn af di vegn fun der velt hobn zaverukhes fun der tsayt farveyet un opgevisht. Ober di shpurn in di hertser fun di mentshn zenen geblibn*" (his traces on the paths of the world have been winnowed over and obliterated by time's blizzards. Yet the traces of people's hearts remain).[268] This is indeed typical Hirschbein: poetic, romantic, and occasionally sentimental. But Ravitch's main criticism of Hirschbein is the latter's seriousness, as he claims that Hirschbein "*farmogt umfarglaykhlekher a sakh mer humor un vits vi er git say in geredtn vort un say in geshribenem*" (possesses incomparably more humor and playfulness than he shows, both in spoken word and in writing). [269] Although prepared to ascribe part of this habitual seriousness to Hirschbein's delicate tactfulness, Ravitch argues that "*es iz a shod*" (it is a pity).[270]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the end it was Ravitch himself who went on to write the book that he had demanded from Shumiatcher. Ravitch's *Kontinentn un okeanen* (Continents and

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[266] Ravitch, "Perets Hirshbeyn: tsum dikhters kumen keyn Poyln."

[267] Isaac Bashevis Singer and Grace Farrell, *Conversations* (University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 73.

[268] Ravitch, *Mayn leksikon: yidishe shraybers, kinstlers, aktyorn, oykh klal-tuers in di Amerikes un andere lender*, 4 (book 1):202.

[269] Ibid., 4 (book 1):201.

[270] Ibid.

Oceans, 1937) was a veritable poetic world atlas, with many of its poems having introductory verses redolent of the opening to an atlas section, as in "*Dyamentene neger-balade*" (Diamond Negro Ballad):

ס׳איז א מעשה אזא פון יערן טאָג,
פון א פֿאַרוואָרפֿן אפֿריקע־שטיק,
א קאָלאָניאַלע נעגער־מעשה
פון פּאָרטוגיזיש־מאזאמביק.[271]

It's just a story from that time,
From a faraway piece of Africa,
A colonial Negro tale
From Portuguese Mozambique.

Nakhmen Mayzil praised Ravitch's book for its contribution of "*naye veltn, vos zenen ba undz in gantsn nisht bavust, situatsyes un svives biz gor fremde, un derbay – iberlebenishn un trakhtenishn fun a yidishn mentsh, geforemt un geshtatlikt in glentsnde ferzn*" (new worlds that are among us completely unknown, situations and environments absolutely foreign, and yet—the experiences and contemplations of a Jewish person, formed and executed in brilliant rhyme).[272] But even Mayzil's highly positive review could not resist declaring the book to be at times "*pretentsyez un bombastish*" (pretentious and bombastic).[273]

Ravitch's luxurious style distinguished him from both Shumiatcher and Hirschbein. Examining Shumiatcher's work can expose this difference with particular clarity; in a way, her work represents the quintessence of what Ravitch disapproved of in Hirschbein. It is also likely that Ravitch's criticisms in part reflected his conflicted relationship with his own creative impulses, ambitions, and limitations—this restless attitude on the most defining features of his

[271] Meylekh Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....* (Warsaw: Literarishe bleter, 1937), 116.

[272] Nakhmen Mayzil, "Review of 'Kontinentn un okeanen' by Meylekh Ravitch," *Haynt* (October 22, 1937): 7.

[273] Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....*, 116.

work. Indeed, some of his poems demonstrate that he shared much more with Shumiatcher than one might have concluded from his review of Shumiatcher's book. This point can be well illustrated by comparing Ravitch's "*Tropisher koshmar in Singapur*" (A Tropical Nightmare in Singapore)—the opening poem of his *Kontinentn un okeanen*—with Shumiatcher's short poem "*Nayn khadoshim*" (Nine Months). The latter poem, as its title suggests, deals with the subject of pregnancy. At the same time, it can be interpreted as a poetic journey around the world, aimed at exposing the ubiquitous suffering and injustice. The historical context plays an important role here. The poem appeared in her book published on the eve of World War II, in 1939, and against a backdrop of a catastrophic deterioration of European Jewry's situation. Although undated, Shumiatcher most likely wrote it during her pregnancy in 1934, in the months immediately following Hitler's rise to power in Germany and the beginning of his official antisemitic campaign. The poem's opening line creates expectations of a life-affirming message: "*Es vakst a lebn in mir*" (A Life grows in me).[274] Yet the subsequent lines reveal a dark vision of an inhospitable world and render the notion of bringing a child into it deeply problematic. It is in those bitter lines that the poem's central message is revealed: "*In mayne oygn vakst der pakhed / far erd, far mentsh, / far shtume, hilfloze geviksn, / far elnt fun dem heymlozn / un shigoen fun farbrekher*" (In my eyes grows the fear,/ for the earth, for humans,/ for silent helpless plants,/ for the loneliness of the homeless / and for the insanity of the criminal).[275] This gloomy view of humanity, including the themes of homelessness and human nature's vulnerability, are shared by both Shumiatcher and Hirschbein. It is impossible to miss the contemporary implications of Shumiatcher's lines that talk directly of persecution, imprisonment and physical annihilation: "*Es*

[274] Ester Shumiatcher, *Ale tog: lider un poemes* (New York: Erd un heym, 1939), 41.

[275] Ibid.

vart dos heymloze lebn af dir./ Es vartn tfises, es vart der elnt,/ der groyl fun talyen,/ dos blut fun eshafotn" (The homeless life is awaiting you. / Prisons are waiting, loneliness is waiting, / the horror of the executioner, / the blood of the gallows).[276]

As in Ravitch's writings, a characteristic feature of Shumiatcher's poem is its theme of cultural universalism, albeit of a slightly different kind. Yet while Ravitch makes his ideas about the universal significance of the Jewish experience explicit, Shumiatcher does not. Her poem never makes any specific references to Jewish suffering at the hands of other nations. The poem's only religious allusion is the image of a crucifixion: "*gekreytsikt brent in heysn volkn / a mentsh nokh far zayn geboyrn*" (crucified, is burning inside a hot cloud / a person before his birth). Far from being a sign of religious specificity, such use of Christian imagery is not uncommon in interwar Yiddish literature. Different Yiddish writers drew on Christian imagery for different reasons and with diverse effects. Some employed it as a way of pointing out the bitter irony of the Christian world's persecution of Jews. As Freud wrote in the late 1930s, "The hatred for Judaism is at bottom hatred for Christianity, and it is not surprising that in the German National-Socialist revolution this close connection of the two monotheistic religions finds such clear expression in the hostile treatment of both."[277] For others, it was a way of focusing on the universality of human experience, as, for instance, in the following lines by Itzik Manger: "*Ale vegn velkhe blondzhen/ tsien zikh tsum tseylem tsu,/ Alts, tsi Yezus iz gekreytsikt,/ tsi di nakht, tsi ikh, tsi du*" (All the meandering paths/ lead to the cross,/ It's all the same whether Jesus is crucified,/ or the night, or I, or you). Similarly, the message in "*Nayn khadoshim*" is about the universal nature of suffering and the inescapability of death: "*Un der sof fun ale sofn: / dos*

[276] Ibid.

[277] Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 147–148.

eybike, / dos umfarmaydlekhe, – / dos muzn shtarbn" (And the end of all ends:/ the eternal,/ the unavoidable,—/ having to die).[278] The link between birth and death, although at the center of the Christian image of Jesus's crucifixion, is as universal as can be.

There are two distinct ways in which Shumiatcher's poem problematizes the notion of pregnancy. The speaker—a pregnant woman "listening" to her body—perceives herself as condemning her future child to a likely life of suffering by bringing it into this cruel world. Additionally, through the mere act of giving life, she also condemns her child to death. In both cases, the poem engages with the subject of travel, extending the literal journey through the world to a metaphorical journey through life, with its inevitable final destination. It is striking to discover that "*Tropisher koshmar in Singapur*," written most likely in 1936 (the year Ravitch was in Singapore and mentioned this poem in his correspondence), ends with the following lines: "*Kh'hob, mayn kind, gemuzt dikh geboyrn / derfar du zolst muzn shtarbn*" (I had to give birth to you, my child,/ You therefore have to die).[279] This is only one among many links between Shumiatcher's "*Nayn khadoshim*" and Ravitch's "*Tropisher koshmar in Singapur*" (A Tropical Nightmare in Singapore).

There is not enough information to determine whether Ravitch traveled to Singapore having read Shumiatcher's poem, but regardless of whether this is a case of direct influence (in either direction), the similarities are striking. The speaker of Ravitch's poem is a lonely traveler who crossed "*zibn veltn un yamen*" (seven worlds and seas) only to discover that he cannot run away from death—as his mother reminds him during "*di heyse nekht afn ekvator*" (the hot nights

[278] Shumiatcher, *Ale tog: lider un poemes*, 42.

[279] Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....*, 23.

at the equator).[280] The "*koshmar*" (nightmare) described by the poem has a twofold impulse. As in Shumiatcher's poem, there is here, a profound recognition of the inevitability of death, which in a way makes life the same everywhere in the world and deprives travel of meaning.

There is an additional sign of connection between the two poems. In a private letter to Ravitch, Hirschbein mentions having read the former's latest work, but chooses to compliment only one specific poem: "*geleyent ayere lider, un a shtarkn royshem hot gemakht ayer lid vegn di shtimungen fun Singapur. Emesdik un tragish. Azoy iz es az 'di velt iz groys, un s'iz nito vu zikh ahintsuton.' Dos hot gezogt di bobe, un mir muzn es iberzogn – un ibergebn!*" (I read you poems and was deeply impressed by your poem about the moods in Singapore. True and tragic. This is how life is: "The world is big, yet there is nowhere to go." This is what my grandmother said, and we have to repeat it and to pass it on!)[281] Significantly, the following paragraph mentions Hirschbein's "*ben-yokhed*" (only son). Hirschbein's praise of the poem is thus not limited to its theme of death. What he comments on even more is the theme of wandering. He was Ravitch's mentor in the world of travel, and it is in this role that he appears in his letter: he is talking as an older, experienced traveler who recognizes the feeling and can empathize with Ravitch's "*koshmar*"—a wanderer's realization that there is no "promised land" ready to take him in and that the endless wandering can never be resolved. Furthermore, Hirschbein's mention of his grandmother parallels the theme of childhood in "*Tropisher koshmar in Singapur*": in both cases, memories of one's East European Jewish childhood are intertwined with the subject of wandering. Hirschbein's mention of his grandmother's phrase—in effect a warning about the

[280] Ibid., 19, 20.

[281] Hirschbein.

futility of travel—is very close to what Hirschbein found in Ravitch's poem—except that, there, it is the mother.

This one poem by Ravitch incorporates virtually every major theme of Yiddish travel literature: the fascination over the exotic, the loneliness, the nostalgia for one's home and for the irretrievable past, and the longing for the traditional world of the parents and grandparents. That longing for where one comes from is closely linked to the theme of Yiddish language and folklore as one's home, origin, and basis of identity—another major theme in Yiddish travel literature.

Thus, at the very heart of Ravitch's engagement with travel are motifs that have come to be strongly associated with the intellectual legacy of Sigmund Freud. In fact, the association was already in place by the time Ravitch launched his travel writing career. It is admittedly highly unlikely that the father of psychoanalysis was aware of the Yiddish poet's writing. Nor is it completely clear to what extent Freudian thought was on Ravitch's radar. What is beyond any doubt, however, is that both Freud and Ravitch thought hard about the function of travel in the process of the emotional and intellectual coming of age, and that both of them wrote about these issues in their respective genres. In 1936, the same year in which Ravitch visited Singapore and wrote his "*Tropisher koshmar*," Freud published an essay which, although preoccupied with Freud's own travel experience, can serve as an incisive commentary on this (perhaps Ravitch's most "Freudian") poem:

> It is not true that in my schooldays I ever doubted the real existence of Athens. I only doubted whether I should ever see Athens. It seemed to me beyond the realms of possibility that I should travel so far—that I should 'go such a long way'. This was linked up with the limitations and poverty of our conditions of life in my youth.[282] My longing to travel was no doubt also the expression of a wish

[282] Sigmund Freud, "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 22, 246–247.

> to escape from that pressure, like the force which drives so many adolescent children to run away from home. I had long seen clearly that a great part of the pleasure of travel lies in the fulfillment of these early wishes—that it is rooted, that is, in dissatisfaction with home and family.[283]

Indeed, in addition to *universalism* and *diversity*, *dissatisfaction* is a key term for Ravitch, as is apparent both in his reviews of other writers' work and in even harsher treatment of himself. His famous *Mayn Leksikon*, which contains entries on hundreds of Yiddish writers and is a cross between a biographic encyclopedia and a collection of explicitly subjective essays, includes a brief entry about himself, which gives a psychological portrait of a deeply dissatisfied man:

> ער האָט זיך נישט ליב. פאר די געדריידלטע האָר פון זיין קאָפּ, ער האָט ליב גלאטע, פאר דער נייגונג צו פעטקייט, ער האָט ליב מאָגערע, הויכע מענשן, פאר זיין אריינפאלן אין התפעלות און אויך אין כעס, ער האָט ליב רויקע מענשן, פאר זיין פחדנות, ער האָט ליב מוט, פאר זיין שלעכטן זכרון, פאַר אַון פאר און פאַר. ער האָט נישט ליב זיינע ווערק. ער האָט ליב דיכ־טער, וואָס שאפן איין אלץ־זאָגנדיק ווערק און ער שרייבט אין אסך פאַרמען, אסך, אסך.

> He dislikes himself: because of his curly hair (since he prefers straight hair), because of his tendency to gain weight (since he prefers tall and skinny people), for how easily he can be provoked into enthusiasm and anger, while he prefers calm people; he is a coward, and he likes courage; he has a bad memory, and on and on and on. He dislikes his works. He likes authors who are able to create one all-saying work, while he writes in many different forms, many, many.

Given the content, the tone may appear to suggest a humorous intonation, but this would be a mistake: Ravitch was a serious man. Moreover, while he is talking about his dissatisfaction with himself, it is directly linked to dissatisfaction, as well as the related guilt, about one's home and family. Perhaps he says it most clearly when he confesses that he felt a deep dislike for the "*galitsishn nomen*" (Galician name) he was given at birth, namely "Zkharye-Khone Bergner."[284] Indeed, Ravitch is even dissatisfied with *divine beauty*. Thus, the *stereotypically* pretty sunset is

[283] Ibid.

[284] Meylekh Ravitch, *Mayn leksikon: yidishe dikhter, dertseyler, dramaturgn in Poyln tsvishn di tsvey groyse velt-milkhomes*, vol. 1 (Montreal: A komitet in Montreal, 1945), 243.

not good enough for him, as he explains his Proustian meditations on reality versus artifice, pointing out the "banality" of the sunset and likening its unassailable and predictable prettiness to the "*bilikste teater-dekoratsye*" (the cheapest stage sets), "*zislekhe roze farbn-mishung*" (sweet pink color mixture). The paradoxical conclusion is that as an artist God has to be recognized as being "*befeyresh a talantlozer*" (clearly talentless) with "*keyn brekl originalitet*" (not a trace of originality).[285] Of course, this opinion is deeply ironic, but it tells us a lot about Ravitch's peculiar way of perceiving reality.

"*Tropisher koshmar in Singapur*" opens with a sinister vision of sweltering tropical heat. Right from the first stanza, the poem abounds in symbolism and literary allusions; thus, the mention of the poet's age would immediately bring to many readers' minds the opening line of Dante's *Inferno*: "*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*" (halfway along our life's path). Although, at forty-two, Ravitch was slightly too old to qualify as being "halfway along our life's path" by Dante's standards, it happened to be exactly the midpoint of his life, and, like the narrator of the *Divine Comedy*, his poem's speaker is about to have a powerful metaphysical experience. No Virgil is accompanying this Jewish traveler; his only chaperones are his own memory and imagination. In both works, numbers play an important role, with Ravitch's "seven worlds and seas" mirroring the nine circles of Dante's Hell. Like Dante's narrator, the Yiddish poet is to encounter the shadows of people whom he knew personally. But it is not those shadows from the past, but rather he himself that must suffer in the Singaporean inferno at the hands of its peculiar demons, i.e. the tropical temperatures and insects. Ravitch's speaker is no mere observer of someone else's affliction—he is the victim being punished for his own transgressions. Physical and emotional suffering quickly become joined: in the first stanza, the

[285] Meylekh Ravitch, "Zibetsn teg himl, shif un yam," *Folkstsaytung (W)* (May 3, 1931): 5.

unbearable heat forms the setting for oppressive thoughts about the "itinerary" of aging; the second stanza introduces a new source of physical suffering, namely the bloodthirsty mosquito, whose sadistic implacability functions as a transparent metaphor for the speaker's irrepressible anxieties:

דִי אויגן אָפֿן, נאַקעט דאָס האַרץ
און בלוט טרינקט א מאָסקיט,
און עס זשומעט, זשומעט, זשומעט
אין קאָפּ זיין קאָשמאַרנע ליד.[286]

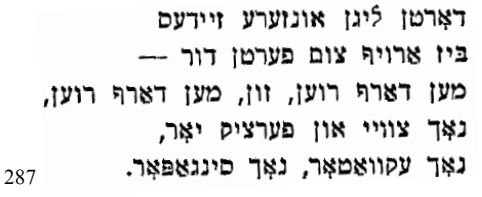
Eyes open, heart bare,
And a mosquito is drinking blood,
And his nightmarish song
Is buzzing, buzzing, buzzing, in the head.

The rhyming of *moskit* (mosquito) and *lid* (song) highlights an important ambiguity: is the poem the creation of the mosquito, either directly or indirectly? It is after all "zayn *koshmarne lid*" (*its* [literally *"his"*] nightmarish song). In other words, to what extent are the thoughts expressed in the poem the product of a time spent in a difficult climate and thus a passing mood? Or are the external challenges, catalysts for a deep stocktaking, epiphany, confession, or perhaps a truly mystical experience? Although a certain level of ambiguity is preserved throughout the poem, the adjectives "*ofn*" (open) and "*naket*" (bare, naked) appearing in the first line create a strong suggestion of the revelation of truth. Examined from this angle, the mosquito and the heat are in the roles of executioners, subjecting the Yiddish poet to torture in order to force him to first see, and then say, the truth.

An even more fitting way to look at what takes place in this poem is to consider it in terms of Freudian psychoanalysis. In a classic Freudian model, the truth begins to emerge, once the speaker is able to go back to his childhood. Thus, the session begins in the third stanza, when

[286] Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....*, 19.

the speaker becomes "*vider a kind*" (a child once again). He is back in his native *shtetl*, but every detail here is in dialogue with his adult self, as when he sees his parents in the marketplace looking at a train. The market represents the world, and the train the possibility of travel and modernity. The tropical luxuriousness of Singapore is suddenly banished from the picture and is replaced by the setting of a typical Jewish childhood. There is nothing glamorous or exotic about the small shtetl, complete with the marketplace—in which Jewish craftsmen and merchants would be trading with peasants from surrounding villages—and, critically, a Jewish cemetery:


דאָרטן ליגן אונזערע זיידעס
ביז אַרויף צום פערטן דור —
מען דאַרף רוען, זון, מען דאַרף רוען,
נאָך צוויי און פערציק יאָר,
נאָך עקוואַטאָר, נאָך סינגאַפּאָר.

287

There our grandfathers are resting
All the way to the fourth generation—
You should rest, son, you should rest,
After forty-two years,
After the equator, after Singapore.

It is the world from which Ravitch, Hirschbein, and countless other young Jews were so eager to escape. And yet, ironically (if predictably), their liberation was often eventually followed by dreams of returning.

The vision of his childhood, his parents, and the cemetery functions as a challenge to his secular bohemian lifestyle, including his literary work, his chase for the exotic, and his search for self. With a single swift movement of her hand, his mother obliterates his whole traveler persona:

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[287] Ibid., 20.

זאגט די מאמע: — דו מיינסט טאקע אמת,
וואם דו האסט דיר איינגערעדט שטארק,
אז די וועלט איז עפעס מער דאָרט
ווי אונזער קליינער מארק?

אָט וואַרף איך די זיבן וועלטן
דורך דעם פענסטער ארוים —
אָט גיס איך די זיבן ימען
אין דעם קיכשעפל אויס — —[288]

And my mother asks me: You really believe
All those things that you accepted so passionately?
That the world over there is any bigger
Than our little marketplace?

I'll throw your seven worlds
Out the window
And your seven seas I will dump
Into the slop bucket.

On the one hand, the mother's voice is soothing: as she offers him "*zibn groshn*" (seven groschen) so that he can buy himself an apple and invites him to rest his head on her lap, she is giving him the opportunity to be a child again. She embraces her child and expels the father. On the other hand, her behavior is also dismissive and aggressive: after all, she breaks apart his entire life, exposing his pursuits as an empty dream. Yet the comfort she is ultimately offering is actually death: her words suggest that where her son belongs is the Jewish cemetery. The baby's cradle has been turned into a grave, and the lullaby is also about death and their common powerlessness in the face of Death. With the father out the picture, the mother and son are together, but the ultimate power belongs to death—the Freudian drama has reached its expected conclusion.

Throughout the poem, there is a sense that the speaker is being punished. But what is the Yiddish traveler being punished for? Or punishing himself for? Freud considered a relevant

[288] Ibid., 21.

question, when he wondered why his excitement about finally reaching the Acropolis— the object of his dreams for a long time—was tinged with something uncomfortable, and his answer is pertinent here:

> But here we come upon the solution of the little problem of why it was that already at Trieste we interfered with our enjoyment of the voyage to Athens. It must be that a sense of guilt was attached to the satisfaction in having gone such a long way: there was something about it that was wrong, that from earliest times had been forbidden. It was something to do with a child's criticism of his father, with the undervaluation which took the place of the overvaluation of earlier childhood. It seems as though the essence of success was to have got further than one's father, and as though to excel one's father was still something forbidden.[289]

This is precisely Ravitch's situation: he comes back to his parents to essentially recognize that they were right and he was wrong: it is the return of the prodigal son, who has by now tasted things of which his parents could never have dreamed.

To Ravitch as a child, the idea of visiting distant places symbolized the ultimate liberation and was a form of rebellion. As an adult, he discovered that the new generation of children that had grown up in the meantime was in that regard no different. Sara Mlotek Rozenfeld, later a well-known Yiddish cultural activist in Canada, had been a student at a TSYSHO school in Warsaw and remembers Ravitch's "travelogue" lecture delivered to an audience of children inside a big auditorium in Krochmalna Street—an area with one of the poorest segments of Warsaw's Jewish population. With the help of a slide projector, Ravitch was able to mesmerize the children with his stories about the exotic places he had visited:

> *Me hot gezesn mit ofene moyl un oyern un zikh tsugehert tsu Ravitshes rayze-ayndrukn. . . . [F]ar di kinder hot er mamesh geefnt dos ershte fentster tsu der velt. . . . s'zenen geven kinder fun der varshever oremkeyt, vos oyser a mol in der Medem-sanatorye oder a kinder-kolonye iz men keyn mol afile in a ban nisht geforn. Un Ravitch hot far zey antplekt a naye velt, un di fantazye ba di kinder hot zikh tseshpilt, un me hot keseyder vegn dem geredt, az me iz mamesh mitgeforn*

[289] Freud, "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis," 247.

> *mit ravitshn tsuzamen in di ale lender in der azoy-gerufener haynt driter velt. Afrike mit ire vunders un oykh mit ire lepers, vegn velkhe mir mir hobn dan tsum ershtn mol gehert un vos hot af undz gemakht a dershterndikn ayndruk.*
>
> They sat with their mouth open and ears perked, listening to Ravitch's travel impressions. . . . [h]e was really able to give these children their first glimpse of the world. . . . these were children from Warsaw's poorest families: apart from a single visit to the Medem sanatorium or a children's camp, they had never even been on a train. Ravitch revealed a new world to them, sparking their imaginations. They constantly talked about it and felt as if they were traveling along with Ravitch through all the countries in what is known today as the "third world": Africa with its wonders and with its lepers, about whom we had then heard for the first time and were deeply shocked.[290]

This moving description is an effective reminder of just how limited travel opportunities were for many of Ravitch's fellow Polish Jews. Their only other source of information was books and, very seldom, films. But to see and hear a real person who spoke your language and yet had himself seen those things was a different kind of experience— and the raw material for dreams and ambitions.

In his poem about Singapore, Ravitch himself is a child. It is characteristic that Ravitch bases his poem in part on one of the most famous Yiddish folk songs, "A mol iz geven a mayse." This melancholy lullaby with a refrain that mentions the loss of one's beloved, tells the story of a king and a queen, whose steady decline over the course of the soul eventually results in the loss of their dearest possessions, the king's death, and the queen's moral demise. Ravitch's use of this song has an element of wordplay, as the first part of his pseudonym, "Meylekh" is also the Yiddish word for "king" that appears in the original folk song. In his version of the lullaby, the "*meylekh*" is no longer the passive character, but the active traveler and poet, who abandons his home and his parents, only to come across loneliness and the need for returning to his parents:

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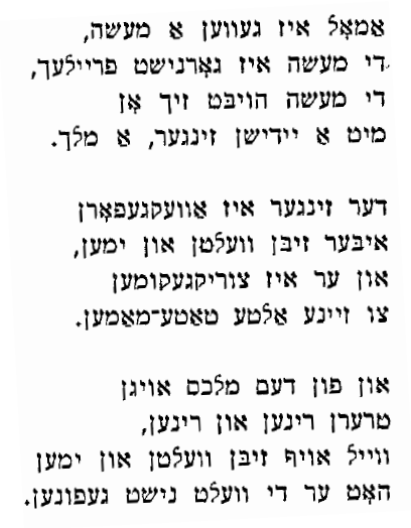
[290] "Meylekh Ravitch: Yubiley-Fayerung" (audio recording), no. Part 2, Public Lecture at the 56th Annual Meeting of the Jewish Public Library of Montreal, Canada (November 3, 1968).


אמאל איז געווען א מעשה,
די מעשה איז נאָרנישט פריילעך,
די מעשה הויבט זיך אָן
מיט א ידישן זינגער, א מלך.

דער זינגער איז אַוועקגעפאָרן
איבער זיבן וועלטן און ימען,
און ער איז צוריקגעקומען
צו זיינע אַלטע טאַטע־מאַמען.

און פון דעם מלכס אויגן
טרערן רינען און רינען,
ווייל אויף זיבן וועלטן און ימען
האָט ער די וועלט נישט געפונען.

291

Once there was a story,
The tale is not at all happy,
The tale begins
With a Jewish singer, a king.

The singer traveled away
Across seven worlds and seas,
And he returned
To his old parents.

And from the king's eyes
Tears won't stop running,
Because across the seven worlds and seas
He did not find the world.

If he is a king, then where is his realm, and who are his subjects? In Ravitch's reinterpretation of "*Rozhinkes mit mandlen*" (Raisins and Almonds), the folksong merges with a folktale that contains motifs reminiscent of the tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav. This is a tale of a "*ben-meylekh*" (prince), who is born into riches and is then reduced to the condition of a homeless wanderer, either because of an external disaster, or because of his own bad behavior. Ravitch's "*meylekh*" comes back having failed to realize his dreams—exhausted, aged, and guilt-ridden. After all, he is not a prince, but a *meylekh*, a king, who was given opportunities that his parents

[291] Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....*, 22.

lacked. His ambition was to achieve superiority and to decline his real inheritance in preference for his "royal" ambitions. As Freud writes: "The very theme of Athens and the Acropolis in itself contained evidence of the son's superiority. Our father had been in business, he had had no secondary education, and Athens could not have meant much to him. Thus what interfered with our enjoyment of the journey to Athens was a feeling filial piety."[292] In one of his autobiographical accounts, Ravitch openly presents his wanderlust in a way that could be read as a form of getting back at his father:

> אז ער איז אלט געווען דריי יאָר האָט ער זיך אמאָל פארזינדיקט, דער טאטע האָט אים געשמיסן, איז ער צוגעגאנגען צו דער טיר, אָנגע־כאַפט דעם שליסל, די קלאמקע ניט געקענט דערגרייכן און געזאָגט רעזאָ־לוט: איך וויל גיין — האָט מען אים געפרעגט: וווּ? האָט ער באשטימט גע־ענפערט: אין דער וועלט אַריין — — אז ער איז אלט געוואָרן 46 יאָר האָט ער געהאַט באַזוכט 44 לענדער, 8 מאָל דורכגעפאָרן דעם עקוואטאָר און באַ־שלאָסן נישט מער צו פאָרן.[293]

> Once, when he was three years old, after being whipped by his father for misbehaving, he advanced to the door, grabbed the key, and, too short to reach the doorknob, announced with resolution: "I want to go." When asked, "Where to?" he answered decisively: "Into the world." By the time he turned forty-six, he had visited forty-four countries, crossed the equator eight times, and decided never to travel again.

Indeed, there could hardly be a more transparently Freudian scenario than the one enacted by Ravitch in his literary works.

Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Shadow" another text with which Ravitch's poem has something in common and that can be helpful for its understanding. It begins with a description of a tropical heat:

> In very hot climates, where the heat of the sun has great power, people are usually as brown as mahogany; and in the hottest countries they are black. A learned man

[292] Freud, "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis," 248.

[293] Ravitch, *Mayn leksikon: yidishe dikhter, dertseyler, dramaturgn in Poyln tsvishn di tsvey groyse velt-milkhomes*, 1:244.

> once traveled into one of these warm climates, from the cold regions of the north, and thought he would roam about as he did at home; but he soon had to change his opinion. […] it seemed to him as if he were sitting in an oven, and he became quite exhausted and weak.

Thus opens this mysterious tale of deeply Freudian exploration. Like Ravitch's poem, "The Shadow" describes the painful, spiritual and creative crisis of a writer who went to exotic places to look for inspiration. Before the main events of the plot take place—the disappearance of his shadow and then its reappearance as an evil alter ego bent on destroying its former master—the story introduces us to the theme of heat. Incidentally, Andersen was one of the nineteenth-century's most accomplished European travel writers. The subject of tropical heat, which in Andersen's story has an additional significance because of the lower position of the sun in the tropics and the effect it has on the length of a person's shadow, is a symbol of an emotional state, but also of a curiosity about the exotic. The danger hinted at here is that when a person finds himself in an alien environment to which neither his body nor his psyche is accustomed, the expectation that the exotic country will become a source of energy may prove naïve. In both works, the heat sets the stage for the reemergence of the repressed. As the prominent Andersen scholar Hans Henrik Møller notes, "this return is '*unheimlich*': the shadow comes from a place where the self is not at home, not at ease with itself; the return of the shadow is the return of something formerly suppressed."[294] And in both works, because of the subject matter, the writing itself becomes suspect: "The realistic and the fantastic, the dream turning into a nightmare and the nightmare turning into reality: the basic structural levels of the text point to the narration itself as the place where the nightmare as well as the new, dreamt-of potential are contained."[295]

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[294] Hans Henrik Møller, "En mand, et ord - H. C. Andersens 'Skyggen,'" in *Andersen og Verden. Indlæg fra den første internationale H. C. Andersen-konference, 25.-31. august 1991*, ed. Johan de Mylius, Aage Jørgensen, and Viggo Hjørnager Pedersen (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1993), 303–310.

[295] Ibid.

For Ravitch, too: there is a contradictory dualism in the very essence of the poem, the fact of its existence.

Despite its apparent negation of travel's value, this poem was hardly a signal of Ravitch's loss of interest in travel. It is, after all, significant that the poem's vision is presented as a nightmare, rather than a clear-headed expression of a Yiddish poet's frustration with the world and determination to go back "*in shul arayn*" (to the synagogue), to use the famous final words of I. L. Peretz's play *Ba nakht afn altn mark* (At Night in the Old Marketplace). As with much of Ravitch's work of this period, this poem has perhaps a touch of the romantic posing and indulgence in the themes of loneliness and the irretrievable "loss of paradise." Hirschbein's work has less posing, but, as his aforementioned letter demonstrates, he readily recognizes the theme and identifies with his counterpart, Whether it is about searching for an alternative to fill the void, or intensifying one's loneliness and uprootedness in order to elevate it to a higher level which can be nurturing creatively, in the end, this theme of being driven to travel because of one's longing for one's old home, which can never be retrieved, lies at the heart of much of Yiddish travel literature.

Such intensely personal poems as "*Tropisher koshmar*," which contain elements of a painful confession, are only one segment of Ravitch's *Kontinentn un okeanen*. After all, his focus is not just on himself as the repentant criminal, but also on the exhilaration of the "crime." So, he is desperate to expand into new areas. In a manner reminiscent of Sholem Asch's passionate description of a bullfight, Ravitch, too, delights in embracing the foreignness and the recklessness of the "*goyishe*" joys: specifically, the gamblers at the horse races in Melbourne:

די אָרעמע אין גייסט, די רייכע אין הארץ,
געבענטשט — די, וואָס ברענגען דעם הימל צו דער ערד!
געבענטשט — די, וואָס שטעלן זייער מזל אַוועק
אויף די געטלעך שיינע פיס פון פערד.[296]

The poor in spirit, the rich in heart,
Blessed are those who bring heaven down to earth!
Blessed are those who stake their fortune
on the divinely beautiful feet of horses.

This passionate hymn to gambling, with its transparent allusions to the Sermon on the Mount, is imbued with a pagan Greco-Roman spirit: "*di getlekh sheyne fis fun di ferd*" (the divinely beautiful feet of the horses)—could not be less Jewish. But that is part of his desire to be original. This was Ravitch from the start. According to the Yiddish poet Rokhl Korn, who had known Ravitch before World War II, "*mit yorn tsurik, ven me hot nokh nisht gevust vegn keyn hipis, iz Ravitsh gevezn a hipi*" (years ago, before one knew of hippies, Ravitch was a hippie). She stresses how, against the will of his parents, he got married at 21 (the legal age), gave up a dream position at a bank, and moved to a garret in Warsaw. He grew a beard! His very passion for travel she presents as another eccentricity, explaining that he "*hot zikh . . . geshtelt a mankolye . . . in kop: er darf durkhvandern di velt*." *"[d]emolt . . . hot men afile nisht gekent dos vort . . . "striptiz", ober Ravitch hot im shoyn ongevendet in zayne lider*" (put a fancy in his head: he must travel the world. . . . [t]he word striptease was then not yet known, but Ravitch had already used it his poetry).[297] And, in a striking echo of Ravitch's review of Shumiatcher, she concludes that "*er hot aropgerisn ale shlayern fun zayne lider un zey geshtelt nakete af der velt-bine*" (he tore off all the veils form his poems and placed them bare on the world stage).

[296] Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....*, 192.

[297] "Meylekh Ravitch: Yubiley-Fayerung."

Ravitch's enthusiastic "omnivorousness" provokes some humor and parody, as in this review arguing that his poems be seen "*als oysdruk fun hekhstn ekstaz in ongezikht fun kosmisher grandyezkeyt un progresivn mentshlekhn progress*" (as an expression of the highest ecstasy in the presence of the cosmic grandiosity and progressive human progress).[298] But he puts his finger on the geographic contradiction when he writes that the book contains "*aza breyter shlal fun lender, indzlen, grenetsn un shlyakhn un aza tife benkshaft tsu eynem a veg vos firt velt-tsurik tsum farvorfenem shtetele in Poyln*" (such a wide array of countries, islands, borders, and roads, and such a deep longing for the one path that would take [him] back across the world to the forsaken *shtetl* in Poland).[299]

Ravitch draws on his travel experiences to experiment in a wide variety of genres. His short story (*dertseylung*) "*Tropikale libe in tsvey mesles un fir briv*" (Tropical Love in Two Days and Four Letters) is based on the fictional love correspondence of a Russian émigré woman in Singapore. In her passionate letters, she implores her lover, who works as a doctor in a lepers' colony, to help her end her life: "*Breng mikh um! Zog mir nisht: 'kenign un shklafn tsuzamen', zog mir nor dos tsveyte*" (Kill me! Don't tell me "both kings and slaves," but tell me only the latter).[300] The unhappy woman describes her passionate anticipation of her lover in terms redolent of tragedy and death: "*ikh lig shoyn naket un gekreytsikt tsum divan*" (I am already lying naked, crucified on the sofa). Her waiting for him turns out to have been in vain, however, as in the end he has to leave her after finding out that he has contracted leprosy. In his final letter to her before permanently moving into the lepers' colony, he concludes that "*in dem teater, vos ir*

[298] K. L., "[Review of] Meylekh Ravitsh. Kontinentn un okeanen.... Varshe, 1937," *Shriftn* no. 1 (January 1938): 40.

[299] Ibid., 46.

[300] Meylekh Ravitch, "Tropikale libe in tsvey mesles un fir briv: fun der serye 'mentshn redn tsu mir,'" *Folkstsaytung (W)* (March 5, 1937): 5.

ruft lebn, hob ikh geshpilt di tragishe—di groyse role. Ikh gey shpiln dem final" (in the theater that you call "life," I played the tragic—the lead—role. It is now time I play out the end).[301] There is a striking similarity here to Aleksandr Vertinsky's "*Танго 'Магнолия"*" (The "Magnolia" Tango), written in 1931 and instantly achieving immense popularity in the Russian-speaking émigré world and beyond, becoming his signature song. In his memoir, Vertinsky even mentions that he was once approached by the Prince of Wales, who asked the Russian émigré singer to perform the prince's "favorite song".[302] With its catchy tango tune and luxurious exoticism and romanticism, it is highly reminiscent of Ravitch's style, and, given Vertinsky's huge popularity in Yiddish circles, it is hardly possible that Ravitch did not know the song.

Whatever his specific influences and models, it is important to consider the issue of Ravitch's intended audience, in order to determine the balance between themes that would have been perceived does foreign versus those that were part of the domestic "common knowledge." With all of his universalism, Ravitch's primary reader was the Yiddish-speaking Jew in Eastern Europe, or at least one of East European background. Yiddish travel writers had a particular audience to cater to, with whom they had a shared vocabulary of words and references that to some extent determined the repertoire of metaphors.

"*Faranen blumen un faranen iberblumen – tsum ibermentsh shtrebt men, ober iberblumen zenen shoyn do*" (there are flowers and there are uberflowers—the *Übermensch* is only an aspiration, whereas *überflowers* already exist), writes Ravitch, in 1938, of his impressions of a tiny island in Vanuatu, in a clear allusion to Nietzsche notion of Übermensch.[303]

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[301] Meylekh Ravitch, "Tropikale libe...,'" *Folkstsaytung (W)* (March 7, 1937): 5.

[302] Aleksandr Vertinsky, *Dorogoi dlinnoiu...* (Moscow: AST, 2006), 124–145.

[303] Meylekh Ravitch, "A nakht af Erakor: af a kanakishn misyonern-indzl," *Folkstsaytung (W)* (January 14, 1938): 5–6.

The driving on the left in London makes Ravitch feel at home: "*iz bikhlal bakvemer un dermont in amolikn Galitsye*" (in general it is more convenient and reminiscent of Galicia of the old days).[304] The Austro-Hungarian Empire drove on the left, and one of its successors, Poland's Galicia, only switched to driving on the right in 1924. Some of Ravitch's references rely specifically on his readers' knowledge of Yiddish literature, as when he accuses Sholem Aleichem of having "*oysgetrakht*" (made up) that in the streets of London one has to "*rateven zikh*" (save oneself), and tells that a "*Tshaplin-shtekele*" ([Charlie] Chaplin cane) helps stop the traffic and that the policemen are dressed in "*vayse taleysimlekh*" (little white prayer shawls).[305]

Indeed, Ravitch always searched for identity and a sense of belonging—and this was a much deeper issue for him than the repertoire of cultural references that he shared with his readers. Most likely, he meant this when he wrote of himself: "*zint zayn frier yugnt zukht er – got*" (since his early youth he has been searching for God).[306] One of his "gods" was undoubtedly Yiddish language and culture, described in "*Gezang af yamim tsu mame-loshn*" (A Song at Sea to the Mother Tongue) as a "*farshtoysene mame, loshn fun undzer prostn folk, / umetum dizelbe, oremheylike af ale finf kontinentn*" (rejected mother, the language of our plain folk,/ the same everywhere, poor holy on all five continents).[307] He portrays Yiddish as the eternal source of hope:

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[304] Meylekh Ravitch, "London: vos eyner, vos ken nisht keyn english, ken zen un hern in eyn 24 sho [pt. 1]," *Folkstsaytung (W)* (April 17, 1931): 6.

[305] Meylekh Ravitch, "London: vos eyner, vos ken nisht keyn english, ken zen un hern in eyn 24 sho [pt. 3]," *Folkstsaytung (W)* (April 21, 1931): 4.

[306] Meylekh Ravitch, *Mayn leksikon: yidishe un hebreishe dikhters, dertseylers un publitsistn in medines-Yisroel; oykh kinstlers un klal-tuers*, vol. 3 (Montreal: A komitet in Montreal, 1958), 385.

[307] Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....*, 287.

דיך האָב איך נעפונען מאמע,
וועז אַלץ איז שוין נעווען פאַרלוירן,
וועז אַלץ וועט ניין צום שטאַרבן,
וועסטו נאָך אין נעזאַנג און אין ווייי
א נייע וועלט נעבוירן![308]

I found you, mother,
When everything had already been lost
When everything goes to die,
You will yet, in song and in weeping,
Give birth to a new world!

Ravitch's Yiddishism was an important factor in his travel. While Hirschbein is a poet in his journalism, Ravitch is a journalist in his poetry. If Hirschbein's universalism is more ethical than literary or linguistic, for Ravitch, Yiddish becomes an ideology, a virtual home, expressive of his idea of ubiquity. With all of his passion for *otherness*, he does not want to assimilate. Writing about New Caledonia's only Jew, he laments that this Sephardic man, who has married a Christian woman, has had his Jewishness diluted and overpowered by the non-Jewish environment. Ravitch uses the Yiddish-Hebrew term "*botl-beshishim*," derived from the Halachic principle of nullifying the non-kosher quality of food if it has contains sixty times more kosher ingredients than non-kosher ones, describing the man as being *botl-beshishim* both generally (*bikhlal*) and personally (*bifrat – privat azoy tsu zogn*) ([309]). Writing about this French colony's potential for Jewish colonization, he remarks that he would not mind spending the rest of his life in this paradise, provided one could create "*a shtetl fun a finf toyznt yidn, vos volt mir gegebn a meglekhkeyt fun kultureln oyslebn zikh*" (a *shtetl* of about five thousand Jews, which would allow me have a cultural life).[310]

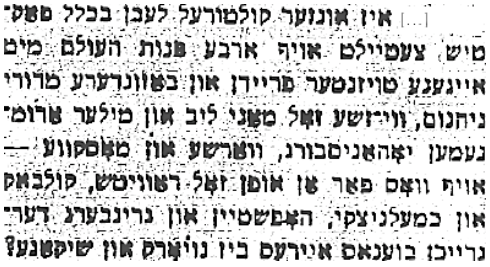
[308] Ibid., 289.

[309] Meylekh Ravitch, "Di 'yidn-frage' in Nay-Kaledonye," *Folkstsaytung (W)* (December 5, 1937): 4.

[310] Ibid.

Not only did travel push the lexical and thematic boundaries of Yiddish writing, but it also played an important role in connecting Yiddish writers living thousands of miles apart. In 1925, the Yiddish writer Yankev Mestl, whose diverse curriculum vitae included a stint as an officer of the Austrian army and a membership in Yiddish actor and director Maurice Schwartz's troupe in New York, addressed the Yiddish literary community with a passionate proposal to establish a fund for assisting Yiddish writers who would like to travel but could not afford it, especially those from Eastern Europe. Mestl's idea was that such a fund would help ameliorate the *"brenendike"* (urgent) problem of the growing disjointedness of Yiddish literature and the resulting *"provintsyele kite-makheray"* (parochial sectarianism) and *"kleynlekhe tseshpaltung fun bazundere 'shuln'"* (the petty splitting into particular "schools").[311] He laments the prevalence of mutual stereotyping by *"tsdodim fun beyde zaytn okean"* (those on both sides of the ocean), with a writer in Warsaw thinking of America solely in terms of *"ayzn- un beton-volknkratser"* (iron and concrete skyscrapers), and their American counterparts, the *"shap-dikhter"* (sweatshop poets) of New York, mentally reducing the Old Country to *"di khalupke funem poylishn shtetl"* (the little hut in a Polish *shtetl*) and other *"opgeshlogene heshaynes"* (hackneyed ideas," literally "used willow branches [for a Sukkot ritual]). Mestl's article is a reminder that it was not merely as Jews, Yiddish speakers, or modern intellectuals that Yiddish travel writers tackled the notions of home and homelessness, belonging and foreignness, but also as Yiddish writers and members of a worldwide Yiddish literary community—however disjointed and amorphous it might have been. Spanning this imaginary community's entire breadth, from Russia and Poland to Argentina and South Africa, Mestl conveys his point by invoking the names of several well-known Yiddish poets:

[311] Yankev Mestl, "A rayze-fond far yidishe vort-kinstler," *Kultur (Chicago)* (November 6, 1925): 1.



[…] our cultural life is in reality scattered all over the world, with different groups celebrating their own joys and going through their own circles of hell. How then could [the New York Yiddish poets] Mani Leib or Miller be able to understand Johannesburg, Warsaw and Moscow? And by what means should [the European poets] Ravitch, Kulbak and Khmelnitski, Hofshteyn and Grinberg reach Buenos Aires, New York, and Chicago?

It would not be long before Ravitch—one of the writers mentioned in the above passage—outdid Mestl's wildest expectations. Yiddish writer Moyshe Shtarkman described Ravitch's achievement as "*a shleymesdiker sintez fun yidishkeyt un universalizm* (a perfect synthesis of Jewishness and universality)." Reminding that "*di literatur af yidish iz a velt-literatur […] zi vert geleyent un geshafn umetum vu se gefint zikh nor a kleyne eyde yidish-redndike yidn*" (Yiddish literature is a world literature . . . , it is read and produced everywhere where even a small community of Yiddish-speaking Jews is found), Shtarkman submitted that "*in a bashmitn zinen simbolirizt Ravitch di alveltlekhkeyt fun yidishn shafn*" (in a certain sense Ravitch symbolizes the global nature of Yiddish creativity)."[312]

Shtarkman's analysis captures perfectly Ravitch's creative aspirations. It is hardly surprising that Ravitch was very interested in local Yiddish literatures and that what he wanted to see was a productive incorporation of *the local*. He insists that Yiddish writers in new places must strive to incorporate the new environment into their writing, as he points out in his piece on Yiddish literature in South Africa: "*shrayber darfn in der ershter rey shepn fun dem arum*

[312] "Meylekh Ravitch: Yubiley-Fayerung."

(writers must above all draw from their environment)." He insists that one should avoid the wrong, outdated idea that "*az ven ir shraybt yidish (in a shprakh fun yidishe shtetlekh) muzt ir zikh banitsn mit der algemeyner tematik fun amoliker yidisher literatur"* (when you write Yiddish—in the language of Jewish *shtetlekh*—one has to rely on the general themes of older Yiddish literature).[313] Ravitch argues that the environment demands from Yiddish literature "*in Afrike – Afrike, punkt vi zi fodert in Rusland – Rusland, un hot a mol fun di 'yunge' in Amerike gefodert – Amerike*" (in Africa– Africa, just like in Russia it demands Russia, and once demanded of Di Yunge—America).[314] It is as if he thought of himself as a Napoleon-like figure whose duty it was to oversee the triumphant geographic expansion of Yiddish literature. To him, the universal scope is the key to what makes Yiddish special and why it can serve as the ideal of the modern Jew, like himself: "*Vorem khuts dem, lomir zikh nisht narn, iz es a shprakh mit shprakhn tsu glaykh. Ober eyne fun zayne vunderbarste eygnshaftn iz der veltfarnem, di farmestung iber ale kontinentn*" (Since otherwise, let us not fool ourselves, it is a language like any other. But one of its most wonderful qualities is its worldwide scope, its spread over all the continents.)[315]

Ravitch illustrates this approach in his own poetry, which exhibits a constant desire to assimilate *otherness* into his work. One way he does this is through textual means, by playing with foreign languages. Even his poem about Warsaw has a title that plays with foreignness: *varshava* (with Yiddish letters).[316] In his poem about a black dancer in New York, with the cool

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[313] Meylekh Ravitch, "Dorem-afrikaner 'baginen': zol shoyn dos mol zayn af an emes!," *Vokhnshrift* 1, no. 35 (46) (November 27, 1931): 2, 7.

[314] Dovid Fram, *Lider un poemes* (Vilna and Johannesburg: Dovid Fram-farlag-komitet, 1931), [viii].

[315] Meylekh Ravitch, "Meditatsyes afn indishn okean vegn yidish," *Vokhnshrift* 3, no. 26 (126) (July 7, 1933): 6.

[316] Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....*, 140.

rhyme *bar – Zanzibar*, he stresses the African connection.[317] In a similar fashion, he playfully juxtaposes foreign names with similar-sounding Yiddish words, as when the Chinese name "Ha" appears in the same line as *vu ahin* (where to): "Vu iz Ha? *Vu-a-hin*?" (Where is Ha? Where to?)[318] On this path Ravitch is on tricky ground. As Michael Cronin points out, "Travel in a world of languages is fraught with difficulty. There are the innumerable pitfalls of translation: the potential for mistranslation; the loss of meaning; the dangers of approximation; the problematic political economy of translation in the Eurocentric appropriation of other peoples and places through ex-colonial languages; the misleading myth of transparent non-refractory translation."[319] Ravitch's attempts to navigate among different languages, including his own native ones, Yiddish and Polish, are fascinating and problematic.

If Ravitch's criticism of Shumiatcher sheds light on his desire for organization, his attack on Fram speaks to his focus on integration and synthesis, whether describing his chat with Fram about "*tsu baraykhern di yidishe literatur mit a gantsn erdteyl"* (making Yiddish literature a whole continent richer), or writing admiringly of Hirschbein's role as the discoverer of Australia for Yiddish."[320] [321] He feels the duty to criticize as his initial excitement over Fram gives way to partial disappointment at the latter's sticking to his native Europe. It is a problem that Niger described aptly in his 1939 article on the new trends in Yiddish literature: "in the Mexican or Cuban landscape which [the Yiddish writer] paints lurk the hills, if not the mud-flats, of his

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[317] Ibid., 102.

[318] Ibid., 42, italics mine.

[319] Michael Cronin, *Across the Lines: Travel, Language, Translation* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), 2.

[320] Fram, *Lider un poemes*, [viii].

[321] Meylekh Ravitch, Letter to Peretz Hirschbein and Ester Shumiatcher (c. 1930), PPH (Folder 98).

native Bessarabia or Poland."[322] In Fram's case, there was hardly any attempt to move away from his Russian roots. All one has is deep melancholy. The theme of endless wandering is constant in this young poet's melancholy work: nobody cares about him, he is filled with loneliness, and in the end it doesn't matter where he is since he is doomed to wander forever. He ends with: "*Un ikh vel nokh voglen a mider af shtoybike vegn on keynem, / un efsher nokh Afrikes elnt af topltn elnt tsebaytn*" (And I will continue to wander wearily on dusty paths with anybody, / and perhaps yet exchange Africa's loneliness for a double one).[323] What Ravitch called for was a different and more positive kind of literary geographic expansion.

Fram's Africa is the site of immigrants' frustrated dreams, including his own hope of succeeding in "*shoyn ayntsuvortslen mayn heym*" (to make my home rooted).[324] There is no celebration of local specificity or attempt to reach a synthesis. This is how Fram opens his poem "*Iz vos*?":

א יז וואָס, אויב געלעבט כ׳האָב אַמאָל אין דער וויטער און שטילער סאַמאַרע
און נאָכדעם מגולגל געוואָרן אַליין צו די ברעגעס פון ליטע,
און איצט – שוין אין אַפריקע פרעמדער, ווו ס׳שמעקט מיטן זאַמד פון סאַהאַרע,
מיט טרוקענע זונען פאַרברוינטע און שטיינערנע פעלזן צעגליטע? [325]

> So what that I once lived in quiet Samara,
> And later was transplanted to the shores of Lithuania,
> And now—already in faraway Africa, where it smells of the sand of the Sahara,
> And of dry browned suns and glowing-hot stone rocks?

Ironically, what Fram is saying is very similar to the assertions in Ravitch's poems written in the voice of a disillusioned wanderer. Apparently, however, the right to indulge in such melancholy

[322] Shmuel Niger, "New Trends in Post-War Yiddish Literature," *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no. 3 (July 1, 1939): 341.

[323] Fram, *Lider un poemes*, 17.

[324] Ibid., 12.

[325] Ibid., 16.

musings is not a luxury that Ravitch is willing to grant his younger colleagues, whom he expects to produce literary works containing a more positive message. Fram's potential response to this demand would consist in pointing that Africa does play a key role in his poems of nostalgia and wandering, one of which claims to have "*Afrikes umet mit Ruslands georemt*" (merged the sadness of Africa with that of Russia).[326] There is solidity and consistency to Fram's themes: he is a classic Wandering Jew, who exists in a historic-geographic continuum of *goles*, in which wandering is completely inevitable:

און ווידער בענק איך מיד נאָך שטיל־ער, ווייסער רו.
איך האָב געמיינט, אַז ל־יב וועט זיין מיר היגע ערד.
איז אָבער פון דאָס-ניי מיר וואַנדערן באַשערט
און זוכן נאָך אַ טרייסט אין ערגעץ אַנדערשוווּ. [327]

And I once again long for the quiet white peace.
I thought that I the local soil would be to my liking.
But once again I am destined to wander around.
And to search for a solace somewhere else.

But Ravitch's positive approach to *goles* is decidedly more upbeat. In his poem "*Veltfolk yidn,*" the theme of wandering is once again romanticized. The Jews, whose status as a "people of the world" is emphasized in this poem, are presented as life's ultimate pioneers in three consecutive lines sharing the same rhyme: they are "*di ershte sokhrim in uralte midber-karavanen, / pasazhirn ershte af ale veltn-banen, / di ershte in ale shifn af ale dray okeanen*" (the first tradesmen and ancient desert caravans, / first passengers on the world trains,/ the first ones in every ships on all three oceans).[328]

[326] Ibid., 8.

[327] Ibid., 13.

[328] Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....*, 290.

This is not to say that Ravitch is not interested in examining world problems that do not directly involve the concerns of his own people. Like Hirschbein and Shumiatcher, Ravitch sees big problems in the world. But to him, even the most horrible things do not overshadow his positive energy. One of the dark themes he explores is colonialism, by which he is clearly appalled. In "*Aboridzhin – untergang-balade*," Ravitch paints a horrific vision of the Australian native population's demise, with three aboriginal men left with no wives: the only woman available to them is a female skeleton drying in the desert sand and serving as a grim reminder that a new era has commenced in which *"kinder vern nisht geboyrn*" (no children are being born).[329] The speaker of the poem addresses an Aborigine child to whom he gives a lollipop, and holds him in his hands, introducing himself as "*dayn merder*" (your murderer), adding that: "*oykh du, kind, vest lang nisht lebn. […] iber dir hengt der toyturtl fun dayn gantser rase*" (you, too, child, will not live long. . . . over you hangs the death sentence of your entire race). The lollipop, too, becomes part of the poisonous forces that will murder the child. A Polish Jew on the eve of World War Two, Ravitch feels compelled to take responsibility for what he considers to be crimes committed by representatives of the White "civilization."[330]

While Shumiatcher's poems dealing with racial divisions and colonial oppression share many similarities with Ravitch's approach, there is an important distinction. Much like in the aforementioned poem about the Aborigines, the speaker of her "*Mauri-printsesin*" addresses a member of the oppressed local community, which in this case belongs New Zealand's Maori nation:

[329] Ibid., 176.

[330] Ravitch, *Iber Oystralye*, 71–72.

מַאוּרי = פּרינצעסין,
שוועסטער מיינע.
דער אָוונט־שטערן בּלייכט דיין ברוינעם קאָפּ
און דער מאַנגאָ־בוים באַקרוינט
דיין אינזל ראַראַטאָנגאַ.

דיינע אויגן זענען ווי אייל־בירטן,
וואָס גליען אין די תּאוותדיקע נעכט,
ווען די בלויקייטן פון די וואַסערן
באַהויכן די זוימען פון דיין אינזל ראַראַטאָנגאַ.
[...]
סיועלן די בלאַסע בליקן פון די ווייטע וועלטן
דיין זוניקייט ביז צו בלאַסקייט זייגן.
און דאַן וועט דער יאוש קומען
און טונקעלער, טונקעלער מאַכן
די זוניקע שוועסטער דיינע,
די זוניקע ברידער דיינע.

פאַרוואָס דען איז דיין אייל־בירט־בליק
פאַרצויגן מיט דער פרעמדער בלאַסקייט
פון די ווייטן ?
מאַורי = פּרינצעסין !
שוועסטער מיינע !

[331]

Maori princess,
My sister.
The evening star lights your brown head
And the mango tree crowns
Your Island, Rarotonga.

Your eyes are like olives,
That glow in the lustful nights,
When the blue of the waters
Elevate the seed of your island, Rarotonga.
. . .
The pale glances of the distant worlds
Will suck out to paleness your sunniness.
And then despair will come.
And make darker, darker
Your sunny sisters,
Your sunny brothers.

[331] Shumiatcher, *In shoen fun libshaft: lider un poemes*, 41–42.

Why then is your olive glance,
Covered in alien pallor?
Maori princess!
My sister!

One of the most important features distinguishing Shumiatcher's tone from that of Ravitch is that rather than stressing her position as an outside observer and focusing on the differences between herself and the native, the speaker's main impulse is to empathize and identify with the native princess. Even more enlightening is Shumiatcher's short poem written in Calcutta, India, in 1927, in which the speaker protests against the very notion of racial identity, refusing to be defined by her skin color and thus to be considered a stranger among the dark-skinned natives of India:

מיין ווייסע הויט דערמאָנט שטענדיק, אַז איך בין דאָ אַ פרעמדע
אוּן אויגן הייסע קוקן מיר אין פּנים ווי אַ שונא.
מיין בלוט, ווי שטענדיק, ווילּ די בייזע רעטענישׂ אַ נאָענטן פאַרטרויען.
אך בין נישט ווייס, איך בין נישט ברוין, איך בין נישט קיינע,
איך בין ווי אַלע מענטשן־קינדער, טרוימער אַוועק...[332]

My white skin is a constant reminder that I am a stranger here,
And hot eyes look into my face like an enemy.
My blood, as always wants the wicked riddle to confess to a loved one,
I am neither white, nor brown; I am none,
I am like all human children – just a dreamer…

Again, this attempt to deny the very notion of skin color is part of the larger insistence on universal humanity.

To Ravitch, colonialism is not only an ethical issue, but also an aesthetic one. And, while some of his poems do suggest the high probability of a thorough globalization, they do not actively advocate the ideal of a universal brotherhood, as Hirschbein does in his works. When Hirschbein laments the destruction of the authentic Tahitian culture, he does not do so out of an

[332] Ibid., 87.

affection for the exotic, but rather because he sees the Tahitian dance as an expression of healthy humanity that he wishes the Western man would join. Ravitch's view of "globalization" is different in a number of ways. He is conscious of the shrinking of the world, cautioning his imaginary reader that in the twentieth century one can longer "*antloyfn af an indzl un antloyfn fun der velt, vi men hot es gekont mit a por tsendik yor tsurik*" (escape to an island and escape from the world, as one could do a couple of decades ago).[333] At the same, he recognizes that the tendency toward globalization as inevitable and not entirely negative. In discussing Ravitch's approach, one cannot ignore that part of the book's historical context was the rise of Nazism. After all, one of the poems in his *Kontinentn* is devoted to his trip through Germany, with the Yiddish translation of the first line of Nazi Germany's official anthem: "*Daytshland, Daytshland iber ales, iber ales in der velt!*" (Germany, Germany, above everything, above everything in the world!), while painting a picture of immense fear and menace.[334] The political climate, for he is describing the current situation in the world: "*In der velt, ven afile der linkster vert ale mol mer un mer natsyonalistish, bin ikh tif inelerkhe geblibn anatsyonal geshtimt. Un vos a tog vert rayfer dos gefil, fun eterishn gefil glivert es tsu shtof, shier nisht a teorye*" (In the world where even those on the left are becoming more and more nationalist, deep inside I remained *anationalist* in my attitudes. And this feeling grows stronger every day, an ethereal feeling is turning into a substance, almost a theory).[335] But in order to confirm it, one must travel: "*Vos toyg di teorye, oyb der obyekt irer, di velt, iz haynt vayter derfun, vi men hot dos oysgekholemt ergets in a Redem, a Lemberg, a Vin, a Varshe*" (What good is the theory if its object, the world, is today

[333] Meylekh Ravitch, "Ratarua un Vaitangi," *Folkstsaytung (W)* (May 18, 1934): 7.

[334] Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....*, 170.

[335] Ibid., 8.

further away from it than what one imagined while still somewhere in Redem, Lemberg, Vienna, or Warsaw.)[336] The list of places is anything but random: Redem (the Yiddish name of Radymno) was the Polish *shtetl* where Ravitch was born, while the other three places on the list were personally important to him at later stages of his life. Thus, his idea of the world's impending transformation becomes a justification for the project of travel. Moreover, it becomes a justification—nay inspiration—for the decidedly inconsistent and contradictory assemblage of moods, identities, and ideas appearing in *Kontinentn.* Thus, Ravitch outlines his quasi-Marxist model of historical progression of nationalism: "*Zikher iz, az di velt geyt tsum anatsyonaln […]. Frier zenen geven shvotim. Untergegangen. Shpeter zenen gekumen felker – kimat untergegangen. Itst veln efsher kumen rasn – kedey oykh untertsugeyn, tseshtern vern durkh der idee, vos ken nisht keyn shvotim, keyn felker, keyn rasn, nor di mentshheyt*" (It is clear that the world is moving toward *anationalism*. . . . There used to be nations—they are now nearly gone. Now will perhaps come races—in order to also disappear, to be destroyed by the idea that knows of no tribe, nation, race, but only of humanity).[337] And he asks: "*Zenen zey a stire in eyn bukh: natsyonale, internatsyonale un interrasishe lider? Neyn. Vayl azoy iz der mentsh, iz der yid in 1937*" (Do they present a contradiction by being in the same book: national, international, and interracial poems? No. Because this is what man is and what the Jew is in 1937).[338] Suddenly, everything is taken care of. The contradictions become fully logical and justified. The chaos becomes a source of hope and perhaps even pride. His vision of New York as the future origin of the "New Man" has elements that feel almost mystical:

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[336] Ibid.

[337] Ibid.

[338] Ibid.

Nyu-York vert shtern – toyznt shtraln, toyznt gasn,
. . .
Tsu der gantser erd – tsum veltnal –
Un mentshn aroys af ale gasn fun Nyu-York
Fun shtern: toyzntshtral,
Vayl der nayer mentsh vet fun danet aroys –
Tsum nayem veltal. [339]

New York turns into stars, a thousand rays, a thousand streets,
. . .
To the whole world, to the whole universe,
And onto the New York City streets humans
[emerge] like stars: in a thousand rays,
Because the new man will arrive from here,
To the new universe.

Ravitch's New York is an immense Tower of Babel, which may spell the end of languages, nations, and man as we know him, and it is characteristic that he chooses the imagery of star, shining, and allness, suggestive of Zohar, sephirot, Eyn Sof, and other terms and notions of Jewish mysticism.

Yet the "*tropisher koshmar in Singapur*" (tropical nightmare in Singapore) will not cease "*zhumen*" (to buzz). The childhood will not stop calling in the language of "*keyver-oves*" (ancestral graves). These ancestors speak not only in the language of the shtetl but also that of Ravitch's homeland—Poland. "*Iker shokhakhti*," he says, employing the traditional Hebrew term for *postscript* (literally, "I forgot the main thing") and goes on to describe his failed attempts to find the hotel where the famed Polish political figure Józef Pilsudski had stayed on the island of Madeira.[340] Ravitch's homelessness stems from a double loss, a double exile: he, the inveterate wanderer, had himself abandoned the *shtetl* and Poland, yet the blame was not all his: the country of his birth in many ways failed to accept him as her own son. The Canadian Yiddish

[339] Ibid., 81.

[340] Meylekh Ravitch, "Modena - der ganeydn af der velt (briv fun veg)," *Folkstsaytung (W)* (April 26, 1931): 6.

writer Paul Trepman, himself a native of Poland, once testified that "*aza prakhtfuln poylish vi Ravitch redt iz zeltn ven tsu hern*" (such a splendid Polish as Ravitch speaks is rare to hear).[341] Ravitch's complex relationship with Poland is poignantly expressed in "*A yidisher dikhter fun Poyln*" (A Jewish/Yiddish Poet from Poland). In this unique bilingual poem, with alternating Yiddish and Polish stanzas of equal length, he confesses his love for Poland, with allusions to famous Polish poets, first to Mickiewicz's famous line in which the great Polish poet addresses his native Lithuania: "*Litwo, Ojczyzno moja*" (Lithuania, My Homeland) and in which Ravitch replaces "*Litwo*" (Lithuania) with "*Polsko*" (Poland), and then to Juliusz Słowacki's "*smutno mi, Boże*" (I feel sad, God), where he adds the communal element of the common fate of Jewish survivors: "*nam*" (we) instead of "*mi*" (I).[342] This is remarkably similar to Avrom Sutzkever's postwar treatment of his complex relationship with Poland in his long poem "*Poyln*" (Poland). All of these issues were to become infinitely more complex and painful in the aftermath of World War II, and Sutzkever's postwar use of Polish themes is accordingly very different. The most important text for an analysis of this evolution is Sutzkever's long poem "*Tsu Poyln*" [To Poland], which Chone Shmeruk calls "a shocking confession."[343]

Of particular interest for the present discussion is Sutzkever's use of Słowacki's poem "Hymn," as "*Tsu Poyln*" contains clear allusions to it, including direct quotations in the original Polish: all except the final fifth section of the poem end with the line "*Smutno mi, Boże!"* [I feel sad, God!], which functions as a recurring refrain in Słowacki's poem, as well. The very word "hymn" is important to Sutzkever and appears in many of his poems: an allusion (perhaps even

[341] "Meylekh Ravitch: Yubiley-Fayerung."

[342] Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....*, 297.

[343] Chone Shmeruk, *Historia Literatury Jidysz: Zarys* (Wrocław: Zakład narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1992) 95.

unconscious) to Słowacki is to be suspected in most of these instances. The opening poem of Sutzkever's "*Valdiks*" [In the Woods] includes the following lines: "*Un s'iz yede rege on a himen – / mir a shod*" (I regret every moment without a hymn) (93). Słowacki's "Hymn" was already one of the most widely celebrated Polish poems in Sutzkever's day. The poem creates a colorful and melancholy image of an exiled poet yearning for his homeland. The mysterious radiance of the sunset plays an important role: the water and the sunlight are reflected in each other, creating a phantasmagoria of color and luster. Even more important for the present discussion is the theme of exile and the speaker's intense nostalgia for the Polish homeland. Słowacki chose to provide a clarification in a note following "Hymn," mentioning that he wrote this poem while on a ship near the coast of Alexandria. In the midst of the exotic Mediterranean landscape he suddenly observes a group of storks, which instantly reminds him of his Poland:

> *Dzisiaj, na wielkim morzu obłąkany,*
> *Sto mil od brzegu i sto mil przed brzegiem,*
> *Widzałem lotne w powietrzu bociany*
> *Długim szeregiem.*
> *Żem je znał kiedyś na polskim ugorze,*
> *Smutno mi, Boże!*[344]
>
> Today, mad and surrounded by the immense sea,
> A hundred miles away from one shore and a hundred miles away from the other,
> I saw storks flying in the air
> In a long line.
> I once knew them on the Polish fallow,
> I am sad, God!

Sutzkever's poem contains a similar motif of nostalgia—yet in his case, he is taking leave of Poland, never to return again. He does so of his own accord, but the sense of nostalgia—experienced now and likely to be experienced in the future, is fully present and links the poem to Słowacki.

[344] Juliusz Słowacki, *Dzieła*, vol. 1 (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo zakładu narodowego im. Ossolińskich, 1949) 77

Unlike Sutzkever's "*Tsu Poyln*," Ravitch's "*A yidisher dikhter fun Poyln*" was written before the war. Like Sutzkever, Ravitch was deeply attached to Poland, including its great national poets. Unlike Sutzkever, however, the cosmopolitan wanderer Ravitch takes leave of Poland earlier. He makes a clear declaration:

Polsko, Ojczyzno moja, dzieciństwa duszo,
Ty jesteś jak wiecznie otwarta rana,
Tym, którzy Cię wiecznie kochać muszą,
Bo tysiąclecia kajdanami z nimiś związana.
און נישט איינמאל בלייב איך שטיין אינמיטן
ערגעץ א וועג א זון־צענליטן,
און טויזנט פראגן קומען און פארשטומען:
וווּ גייסטו, פון וואנעט האסטו זיך גענומען?

Nagle łzy jak krwotok buchają ze mnie;
Polsko, kocham Cię wiecznie, potajemnie;
Niech milczy, kto Miłość zamilczeć może,
My, poeci, nie możem; smutno nam, Boże.

אזוי ווי דו קענסט פון דיין הויט נישט שפרינגען,
אזוי מוזסטו ווייגען און הערן, ווען פלוצלונג צעזינגען
זיך אין דיין נשמה די פוילישע לאנען,
345 און קירכן־גלאָקן פארנאכטיקע קלינגען, דערמאָנען — דערמאָנען.

Poland, my Homeland, my childhood's soul,
To him who must love you for ever
You are like an eternally open wound,
For you are linked to him with the chains of a thousand years.

And often I suddenly pause
Somewhere on a sun-heated road,
And a thousand questions come and silence:
Whither are you going? Whence have you come?

Tears start pouring from me suddenly, like blood:
Poland, I love you eternally and secretly;
Let him who can silence Love keep silent,
We, poets, cannot; we feel sad, God.

Just like you cannot jump out of your skin,
So, you have to weep and listen, when suddenly
The Polish lawns inside your soul burst into song,

[345] Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....*, 297.

And the evening church bells ring as a constant reminder.

This Polish-Yiddish poem is written in the voice of a person desperate to resolve a cultural identity crisis. The poem's speaker cannot free himself from his attachment to Poland; wherever he goes, the country of his birth follows him: "*geyt mir nokh der troyer fun poylishe lanen, / iber finf kontinentn un dray okeanen*" (the sadness of Polish lawns follows me, / over five continents and three oceans).[346]

Do Boga po polsku mówię, gdy wzywam Go na morzu,
przez burze,
Po polsku kocham — gdzieś w Nowym-Jorku lub
Singapurze, [347]

I speak Polish to God, when I call to him at sea,
in a storm,
I love in Polish -- somewhere in New York
or Singapore.

The bilingualism here is critically important. The poem's Polish stanzas are not quotations but original Polish poetry by Ravitch. And why not? Why should Ravitch not be writing in Polish? Published in 1937 in Warsaw, *Kontinentn* was also a *Polish* book. It is telling that while the book's notes contain the translations of most of the non-Yiddish passages, such as the English phrase "*hev a gud taym"* (Have a good time), no translation is given for the lines in Polish.[348] The following explanation of this editorial is included in an endnote:

א יידישער דיכטער פון פוילן — די פוילישע סטראפן זענען פאר-
ראפראזירט פון מיצקיעוויטש־סלאוואצקי־פערזן. איך גיב נישט צו די
איבערזעצונג פון דעם פוילישן טעקסט. דער פוילישער ייד וועט סיווי
פארשטיין און דער נישט־פוילישער וועט סיווי נישט פארשטיין... [349]

[346] Ibid.

[347] Ibid., 298.

[348] Ibid., 349.

[349] Ibid., 351.

A Yiddish poet from Poland—the Polish stanzas are paraphrased from the verses of Mickiewicz and Słowacki. I don't provide the translation of the Polish text. The Polish Jew will understand anyway, and the non-Polish Jew won't understand either way.

Ravitch's relationship with Poland and Polish is another part of his Freudian drama, the drama of a person with a dual identity—another horror story reminiscent of Andersen's *The Shadow*. One of the specific expressions of the theme of the internal identity conflict comes through the image of a family drama in which the child is torn between two mothers:

וואָר בין איך, וואָס איז מיין נשמה —
האָבן זי אויף אַן אמת צוויי מאַמעס געבוירן?
קלינגען, קלינגען, קלינגען —
גלאָקן קאַטוילישע, פוילישע, פּאַרנאַכטיקע.
אין שקיעה־ליכט — קלינגען — אין רויטן.

אָבער וווּ גיי א י ך?
וואָס מיינען פּלוצלינג די וועגטער, וואָס קלינגען
אין מיינע אויערן:
די וועלט האָט זיבן טויערן
און אַלע זענען פֿאַר דיר פֿאַרשלאָסן —
די נאַכט האָט פּלוצלינג שוואַרץ פֿאַרגאָסן
דעם אונטערגאַנג, דעם רויטן —
אוֹן — ווי וועט מיין סוף זיין? אויב צוויימאָל געבוירן —
מוזן אויך קומען צוויי טויטן?[350]

Who am I? What is my soul?
Was it indeed born from two mothers?
Bells are ringing, ringing, ringing—
Catholic, Polish, and evening ones—
Are ringing in the red light of the sunset.

But where am *I* going?
What meaning do the words that ring in my ears acquire all of a sudden?
The world has seven gates,
And they are all shut for you—
Night has suddenly covered in black
The red sunset,
And what will my end be like? If born twice,
Must one also have two deaths?

[350] Ibid., 298.

The notion of two deaths is brilliantly ambiguous: one could interpret it either as an advantage (along the lines of a cat's nine lives), or alternatively and less positively as the prospect of greater suffering and a form of death that will be more prolonged and painful. The red sunset, which Ravitch describes with the word "*untergang*," which can also mean ruin and decline, is suggestive of blood. In this condition of doom, Ravitch's theme of universalism acquires important political connotations.

The longing for universalism pursued Ravitch throughout his work. Rather than being linked to politics, it was primarily linked to his search for identity. His book is full of potential solutions to an identity crisis, as, for instance, the speaker's assertion that he is *"a dikhter, un a vanderer un a yid*" (a poet, a wanderer, and a Jew) in the poem with the symbolism-rich title "*In der nyu-yorker frayheyt-statue*" (In the New York Statue of Liberty).[351] But these answers are tentative, as a few poems later, in "*Nakht-geshprekh mit zikh un mit got*" (Night Conversation with Oneself and with God), he says "*Zog mir, got, ver bistu, ver bin ikh, ven zenen mir ale?*" (Tell me, God, who are you, who am I, who are we all?).[352] Essentially, Ravitch declares himself to be sick. Once again, Andersen's *The Shadow* comes to mind: the trip its protagonist takes in order to discover truth and beauty results in his gradual transformation into "a shadow of himself" and his ultimate destruction by the *unheimlich* entity that used to be his own loyal shadow. An example of Ravitch's use of similar themes is his deeply mournful "*Shlofloze yam-nekht*" (Sleepless Sea Nights):

[351] Ibid., 72.

[352] Ibid., 315.

אלע וועגן פארשאטן, אלע בריקן פארברענט הינטער מיר,
נאקעט געקומען אויף דער וועלט און אַרעם וואָגל איך ארום אויף
איר.

מען זאגט, איך געהער צום יידן־פאָלק, זיין זון רופט מען מיך אָן,
נאָר זיי קענען מיך נישט און איך קען זיי נישט, מיינע שטיפברידער —
זעכצן מיליאָן.

און יידיש זאָל דאָס מיין לשון זיין, מיין נשמהס טעגלעכע וואסער
און ברויט,
א, איך וועך שטומער פון טאָג צו טאָג, מיין לשון איז קראנק, א טאָג
פאר טויט. [353]

All the buried paths, all the burned down bridges behind me,
I arrived in the world naked and I wander around it naked.
They say, I belong to the Jewish people, they call me its son,
But they don't know me, and I don't know them, my stepbrothers—
sixteen million.
And my language is supposed to be Yiddish, my soul's daily water and bread,
O, I grow more silent from day to day, my language is sick, a day before death.

This crisis of identity, in which the speaker feels rejected by his own people, shows a greater focus on the poet's own suffering than on the collective challenges facing the Jews. Moreover, the speaker's suffering is presented in terms of sickness and death. In general, Ravitch's poems, are full of imagery related to disease, including the following description of *goles* as a deadly pathological condition:

וועלט־יידן —
ליגן ווי ים־קראנקע סקעלעטן,
אין בייכער פון שיפן אויף קופעס קוילן, חדשים־לאנג, ווי מען ליגט
אויף בעמן,
אליין פארשווארצט ווי א קופע קוילן,
צווישן אמעריקע, אפריקע, ארגענטינע, אויסטראליע —
און רעם לאנד פון דער אפנעשטויסענער ליבע — פוילן. [354]

World-Jews—
Lie like sea-sick skeletons,
In the bellies of ships, on heaps of coal, for months, as one would lie in bed,
They themselves are black as a coal heap,

[353] Ibid., 200.

[354] Ibid., 293.

Between America, Africa, Argentina, Australia—
And the country of rejected love—Poland.

The impressive list of continents notwithstanding, there is little glamor, romanticism, or celebration in these bitter lines about a sick people. The theme of pathology does not only appear in poems that deal specifically with Jewish concerns. Thus, "*Libe un toyt ba di lepers af Sumatra*" (Love and Death among the Lepers on Sumatra) contains graphic descriptions of the physical symptoms of leprosy that Ravitch observed in Indonesia :

נאָר ווי אויף אָנגעפּוילטע עפּל — אויף די עפּל פון אירע בריסט —
לעפּרא־פלעקן.
. . . . . .
וויל אַזוי איז די וועלט, אז דער גאָט, וואָס שלאָגט זיין מענטשן־מין,
וואָס ער ווייס נישט ענוי, וואָס ער איז דערמיט אויסן,
האָט די לעפּרא־קרענק געשאפן אזוי, אז די גלידער פוילן שטיקווייז און
אינציקווייז,
נאָר נישט די אויגן און נישט די שויסן. 355

(But like on rotting apples—on the apples of her breasts—leprosy spots.)
. . . .
Because such is the world, that God who punishes His mankind,
And doesn't know Himself what He means by it,
He created the disease of leprosy in such a way that it causes limbs to rot in pieces and whole,
But not the eyes, and not the lap.

While in some of his other poems, Ravitch challenges God's artistic abilities, here he questions God as a fellow author. Ravitch's key theme of uncertainty is here expanded to include God. It is characteristic that while *Kontinentn un okeanen* does pay attention to the threat of Nazism and to the abuses of colonialism, in general, politics has a relatively limited presence in the book. Not that the great social transformations of the twentieth century are not important here; yet the emphasis is much more on universal issues of human nature than on going into the specifics of political events and taking sides in political debates. Thus, his poem in which a "*vayse grefin*"

[355] Ibid., 59.

(white countess) in Harbin and a "*geler riksha-kuli*" (yellow rickshaw coolie) have a brief romantic encounter has little to say about the Russian revolution and Bolshevism.[356] It is, however, a moving exploration of the state of being lost between past and future, the tragedy of belonging to a country that no longer exists, the stress of linguistic and cultural isolation, and the human need for emotional and physical closeness. The poem describes the Russian refugee countess as an embodiment of despair, crisis, and disintegration. Her decision to seduce the local rickshaw driver is her final appeal for some comfort—before taking her own life by going "*tsum groysn rikhter*" (to the great judge), i.e. Harbin's Songhua River. It is as if, having rejected his *shtetl*, he was trying to compensate for that void with the whole world, ready to try on numerous identities in his eagerness to feel complete.

"*Libe un toyt ba di lepers af Sumatra*" illustrates an important difference between Ravitch and Hirschbein. The latter's texts also contain multiple references and metaphors involving disease, as, for instance, in the descriptions of Gauguin's decomposing body in Tahiti. Yet unlike the medical references and metaphors in Peretz Hirschbein's travelogues, which the narrator never aims at himself (his task is to diagnose others), Ravitch's poetic persona is both that of a researcher and a patient. While Isaac Bashevis Singer called Yiddish "the language of us all," Ravitch's observation of lepers in Indonesia inspires him to make a universal claim about the sick state of humanity by suggesting that "*Ale zenen mir dokh eygntlekh lepers. Ale zenen mir meshugoim*" (Essentially, all of us are lepers, and all of us are insane).[357] Both Singer and Ravitch are talking from the standpoint of their generation: the transitional Jewish generation stuck in the tragic and confusing twentieth century.

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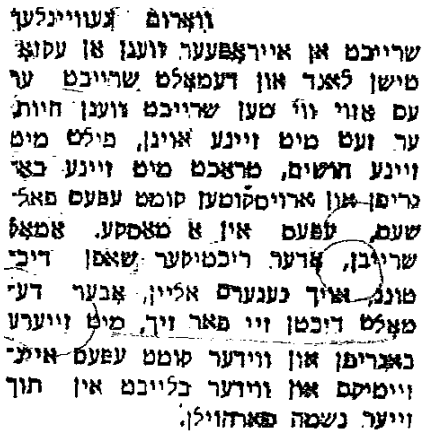
[356] Ibid., 52.

[357] Meylekh Ravitch, "Tifster shigoen un hekhste libe tsvishn di metsoyroim af Sumatra," *Folkstsaytung (W)* (April 12, 1936): 7.

The elements of self-examination and self-flagellation should not eclipse the fact that Ravitch's fascination with *difference* did at times help him to identify with others and to avoid the trap of objectification. The link between the confusion about one's own identity and the aspiration for openness was part of the overall tendency among Western travel writers. As Charles Forsdick explains, many of the reasons behind the immense importance and dynamism of travel literature in the interwar period had to do with a civilizational crisis: "Such expansion and reassessment of the potentials of the journey beyond the geographical boundaries of Europe occurred against the backdrop of a series of threats to the field of travel itself: the failure of the colonial system; growing intimations of the rise of globalization; and a vehement anti-exoticism which meant that a hitherto staple element of travel writing was undergoing radical change."[358] The identity struggle was not unique to Yiddish writers. It is crucial to recognize that Ravitch was not a fan of cheap superficial exoticism, but rather was fully aware of the anti-exoticism discourse. When the Yiddish translation of works by the celebrated French Guyanese poet and novelist René Maran—who had in 1921 become the first black writer to win the French Prix Goncourt—was published in Warsaw, Ravitch wrote a thoughtful review. His world travels still in the future, Ravitch already demonstrates an avid interest in the subject of foreignness, appreciation of cultural authenticity, and an eagerness to see bridges across languages and cultures:

[358] Charles Forsdick, "Sa(l)vaging Exoticism: New Approaches to 1930s Travel Literature in French," in *Cultural Encounters: European Travel Writing in the 1930s*, by Charles Burdett and Derek Duncan (Berghahn Books, 2002), 30.



Because normally it is a European who writes about an exotic country, and then he writes the way one would write about animals. He sees with his own eyes, feels with his own senses, thinks with his own notions, but once it is written down, it is something false, something wearing a mask. Sometimes Africans write themselves, or better said, create, but then they compose for themselves, based on their notions and again something one-sided comes, and again their soul in essence remains concealed.[359]

It is safe to assume that, as a Jew, Ravitch had a strong portion of immunization against this kind of objectification, as it was something he knew firsthand. It is characteristic, that while exoticism was the target of attack, mass tourism was not, at least, not among Yiddish writers; perhaps this is a sign of how it was all new to them. They did not belong to a society that practiced it much and thus "the class-contempt of killjoys who conceived themselves independent travelers and thus superior by reason of intellect, education, curiosity, and spirit" was not typical of them.[360] It did take some moral and intellectual subtlety to avoid the pitfalls. Lesser Yiddish writers fell through, but not Ravitch.

[359] Meylekh Ravitch, "Dos vayse harts in a shvartser hoyt: a naket bukh fun a neger vegn negers," *Folkstsaytung (W)* (August 23, 1929): 9.

[360] Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 40.

Rokhl Korn used the notion of dualism in her insightful discussion of Ravitch's contradictory personality: "*in zayne lider . . . iz take do ot der doziker dualizm; der dualizm fun a mentsh vos er hot efsher gevolt epes andersh, ober di bohemishkeyt in im, vos iz geven zeyer shtark ober er hot zi getsoymt, vayl er iz gevorn a talmid fun Shpinoze un a getrayer talmid un er hot zayne printsipn durkhrgefirt in lebn*" (in his poems . . . there is this dualism; the dualism of a person who may perhaps have wanted something different, but the bohemian spirit in him was very strong; as he became a student of Spinoza, and a devout one, and he realized his [Spinoza's] principles in life). This bohemian element is readily discernible in such poems as "*Zumer-nakht-geshprekh mit froy Pariz*" (Summer Night Conversation with Madame Paris), in which the whole city—a possible allusion to Eynhorn's depiction of the Wandering Jew as a Parisian pimp in *Khaloymes fun a vanderer*—is transformed into a streetwalker:

— קום שיינע, קום פּאריז אין א טונקעלן פּארק,
איידער עס שלאָגט די צוועלפטע שעה,
און ס'גייט דער לעצטער מעטראָ,
און איך האָב נאָך א לעצטן פראנק,
לאָז דיך נישט בעטן שווער און לאַנג,
דו ביסט דאָך א לייכטע פרוי — שטאַרק, שטאַרק, שטאַרק
האָב איך דיך ליב. —
. . . . . .
נו קום — אין מעטראָ צום אייפל־טורעם,
נו, רוק שוין אריין די האַנט אין מיין אָרעם. [361]

Come, beauty, come, Paris, to a dark park,
Before it strikes twelve,
And the last metro train leaves,
And I still have one last frank,
Don't let yourself be asked so hard and long,
You are, after all, an easy woman—strongly, strongly, strongly,
I love you.
. . . . . .
Come then–by metro to the Eiffel Tower,
Come, put your hand under my arm.

[361] Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....*, 145–146.

Lighthearted, curious, mischievous, and flirtatious—this is one face of Ravitch. But at the same time, Ravitch presented himself as one of Hirschbein's God-seekers. Here is his fascination with Spinoza, his vegetarianism, his ascetic lifestyle—and yet all this immense richness of colors, names, and images. It is as if he was trying to punish himself. The more he took in, the more he had to restrict himself and insist on the strictness of his search, until his view of his literary mission was truly messianic: "*In di remen fun der yidisher velt-literatur vet zikh oyskristalizirn der seyfer-hasforim fun der yidisher makhshove un mayse fun di letste tsvey toyznt yor, un vet der velt brengen dos oysleyzndike vort fun mides-harakhmim in zayn reynster form."* (Within Yiddish world literature will crystallize the Book of Books of the Jewish thought and deed of the last two thousand years and will bring to the world the redeeming word of the virtue of Mercy in its purest form).[362]

Punished he must be, or rather restricted, from the very world he was so eager to explore and embrace. In "*Tropisher koshmar*," he is sentenced to death by his mother's act of giving birth to him. In poems such as "*Af keyver-oves—iber der velt*" (At Ancestral Graves—Around the World), Ravitch sentences himself to death for abandoning his home. He exiles himself to the cemetery:

פון קעיפטאון און פון וועלינגטאָן,
ניו־יאָרק און האָנג־קאָנג און ווישענראָד —
כ'בין א יידישער זינגער, ניי איך ארום
אויף קבר־אבות פון שטאָט צו שטאָט.[363]
[....]

[362] Ravitch, *Mayn leksikon: yidishe un hebreishe dikhters, dertseylers un publitsistn in medines-Yisroel; oykh kinstlers un klal-tuers*, 3:386.

[363] Ravitch, *Kontinentn un okeanen: lider, baladn un poemes azyatishe, amerikanishe, afrikanishe....*, 306.

פֿאַראַנען א גרויסע וועלט אויף דער וועלט,
און אין איר א צווייטע, יידישע וועלט,
א וועלט פון גאָלד און פון גייסט און פון נאָט,
בין איך א זינגער — פון דעם פאָלק פון — — געלט.

און אין לעבעדיקער יידישער וועלט,
איז א דריטע וועלט דאָ, א דריטע — איז דאָס
די וועלט פון קברים, די וועלט פון בית־עולמס,
האָב איך זי ליב, און איך וויים פאַרוואָס.

אין די טעג אָן טרייסט וע איך אין איר א טרייסט,
און אין נעכט אָן נאָט קומט פון דאָרט צו מיר נאָט,
דאָרט וועט ער מיך ברענגען צו רו, צו רו —
אַלץ אייגם: אין ניו־יאָרק, צי אין ווישעגראָד. [364]

From Cape Town and from Wellington,
New York and Hong Kong and Vyšehrad—
I am a Yiddish singer, I walk around
At the parental graves from city to city.
[….]
There is a big world in the world,
And in it a second one, the Jewish world,
A world of gold and of spirit and of God,
I am a singer—of the people of—money.

And in the living Jewish world
There is a third world, a third one–it is
The world of graves, the world of cemeteries,
I love it, and I know why.

During the days without comfort, I see comfort in it,
And in the nights without God, God comes to me from there—
There he will bring me to rest; to rest--
It's all the same: in New York or in Vyšehrad.

The man who has traveled across the wide world is forced (or forces himself) to accept that he belongs neither in the "*groyser velt*" (big world) nor in the "*yidisher velt*" (Jewish world); the only world that he knows to be fully his is "*di velt fun kvorim*" (the world of graves). Andersen's Shadow has had its triumph: the Yiddish poet has condemned himself to be a wandering shadow in Jewish cemeteries. Only there—in that special space that also includes the graves of his

[364] Ibid., 307.

parents—can he find peace. Has then this dissatisfied rebel and insatiable traveler finally found satisfactory answers to the difficult questions concerning his identity and belonging? If so, his final message is hardly more cheerful than that of Hirschbein, whom Ravitch reproached for having an overly negative worldview and melancholy tone.

But, of course, Ravitch had more than one kind of message to offer, his fluidity both his strength and his weakness. While Hirschbein, the quiet Jewish pantheist, sought naturalness, Ravitch, the loud Yiddishist universalist, pursued and above all *celebrated* originality. While Esther Shumiatcher, according to Ravitch, meant her poetry to merely convey her internal world, Ravitch's own ambitions included other worlds as well, whether the world of Yiddish literature, or the world at large. Ravitch's quest for "cosmic grandiosity" prompted him to travel to the ends of the earth both literally and, through his literary experimentation, metaphorically.

Indeed, the idea of crossing or altogether eliminating borders and boundaries was at the core of Ravitch's life and work. Ravitch was a representative of the new secularized generation of Yiddish-speaking Jews, and his globetrotting was in a certain sense a triumphant tour of liberation. At the same time, as Hirschbein explains in "*Religye un kultur*," the elimination of *gedorim* (boundaries) presented certain threats and forced one to look for alternatives. At least one of the *gedorim* that Ravitch adopted for himself may have influenced Isaac Bashevis Singer. At the beginning of his 1971 talk, Singer took a minute to thank his Montreal hosts, in particular Ravitch. "*Ikh kon zogn*" (I can say), stated Singer, "*az mayn lebn iz farbundn mit im*" (that my life is connected with his) and goes to acknowledge that staying at the Warsaw home of Ravitch, a devout vegetarian, played a major part in his later decision to become a vegetarian himself. For both Singer and Ravitch, abstaining from meat was part of a lifelong endeavor to construct one's own system of morality.

For Ravitch in particular, ethics, both in its practical applications and as a subject of philosophical inquiry, was of paramount importance—a logical position for this self-avowed Spinozist to whom the Dutch Jewish philosopher's magnum opus *Ethics* became nearly as important as the Torah would be to a religious Jew. Indeed, for Ravitch, Hirschbein, and for many other modern Yiddish travel writers, the pursuit of travel was a method of ethical exploration. The absence of the boundaries previously offered by religion turned many young Jewish intellectuals into aspiring cartographers attempting to draw new world maps to help themselves get their bearings geographically, culturally, emotionally, as well as ethically. At times, all that was required was to peek through one's own window; all too often, however, it proved as hard as searching for the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel beyond the Sambation River.

Chapter 4.

In Search of the Promised Land: Politics and Ideology

1. The "Grand Experiment"

While Yiddish travel literature of the first two decades of the twentieth century was largely dominated by the urge for education and exploration and the focus on the Other, the sweeping changes brought about by World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Balfour declaration, created grounds for a strong focus on destinations and issues "closer to home." Although the proliferation of various forms of socialism and Zionism among Russian Jews had begun earlier—in the late nineteenth century—it only became a major element of Yiddish travel literature in the 1920s. During that particular decade, the entire Western world was bursting with political movements and ideologies. The severely unfavorable conditions in places like Poland ensured that, from a political standpoint, the Jewish world was at least as active, deeply affected as it was by the competition of various strands of socialism, communism, Zionism, territorialism, as well as Polish, Russian, German, and other kinds of assimilationism. Most of these political ideologies had specific geographic destinations associated with them, and, as far as Yiddish travel literature is concerned, the main ones were Soviet Russia (including the Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan), corresponding to communism; Palestine, linked to Zionism; and the long list of places, ranging from Argentina and Brazil to Australia and Kenya, reflecting the diversified approach of territorialism. (For obvious reasons, the literary activities of those who could be termed *assimilationists* were largely conducted outside the boundaries of Yiddish language and culture). This is not to suggest that someone traveling to Palestine could

not have viewed the historical Jewish homeland through a communist lens, or that someone visiting Australia could not have been guided by strong Zionist leanings.

Communism and Zionism in particular exercised a profound influence on many writers. Significantly, one did not necessarily have to be an adherent of an ideology in order to be affected by it: opposing it was often just as consequential as supporting it. Ideology both impacted one's perception of reality and provided opportunities for exploring social, political, and ideological issues from particular angles. Moreover, when it came to the perception and descriptions of some of the places that were ostensibly outside the dominant political processes, such as the United States, looking at those societies through the prism of a particular ideology and based on individual political, professional, and artistic associations and loyalties could provide additional opportunities for exploring social, political, and ideological issues. And this is especially true of texts shaped by communism, a universalist ideology with a much wider geographic reach than that of Zionism.

Both communism and Zionism operated within the millennia old Jewish discourse of messianic redemption and return to the Promised Land. Motifs and imagery related to this originally and fundamentally religious discourse are discernible throughout many Yiddish political travelogues. In place of the exotic travel literatures focus on the present, the emphasis in these travelogues shifted onto the future, aspirations for utopian future, whether through the Communist promise of the world revolution or the Jewish renewal in Birobidzhan, or in the ancient biblical land, which, following the Balfour declaration was gradually losing its image of complete implausibility. Despite the fact that the two ideologies often stood in direct opposition to each other and were at times each other's embittered enemies; historically and culturally, too: as Zionism harked back to an ancient tradition, while communism was a new and revolutionary

idea; and yet the latter borrowed much from the former and partly followed the same messianic logic. In fact the influence was mutual, for Zionism, too, was informed by the socialist discourse into society and by the legacy of Hegelian and Nietzschean philosophy that had emboldened the East European youth beginning in the last quarter of the 19th century. Yet when it comes to issues of Jewish identity, the Land of Israel was unparalleled in its importance to the Jewish traveler, including the Yiddish travel writer. Whatever the particular writer's political convictions or other factors, the ancient biblical homeland was eternally and, as some experienced it, *inescapably* relevant. Yiddish writers did not necessarily come to Palestine because of a commitment to a religious or political movement, but, because in a certain sense, they could not ignore the most obvious destination for the Jewish traveler—the central spot on the Jewish *world map*.

Palestine, *Erets-Yisroel*, and the State of Israel: these three alternative terms for the same geographic destination reflect both the changing historical conditions and the diversity of Yiddish travelers' perceptions of the Middle East: from a fact finder's scrutiny to a pilgrim's awe to a triumphant Zionist's pride. All of these various themes tended to be united by expressing the same theme of *promise*: a word that aptly encapsulates the notion of the biblical past in the *Promised* Land, the traditional diasporic Jew's perception of the Land of Israel as the one *permanent* and *inalienable* point of cultural and religious reference, and the rise of the Zionist movement with its insistence on this territory's *promise* as a solution to the Jewish plight.

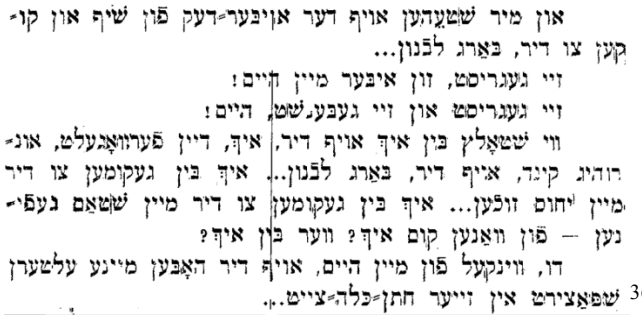
Even in the most neutral and secular travelogues of the Middle East, the Land of Israel contains elements of a mythical space. In other words, whether it is controlled by the Ottoman Empire, Britain, or, after the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jews themselves, its significance within a Jewish context is in a certain sense permanent. The multitude of

associations evoked by the term "Erets-Yisroel" reaches far beyond the current political conditions. Indeed, in accordance with the common usage, most Yiddish travel writers preferred this ancient Hebrew term to the name "Palestine," which was closely linked to its official political status. The map of Africa and the Middle East in Noyekh Mishkovski's 1936 travelogue illustrates this tendency in its preference for the modern term "Egiptn" over the biblical "Mitsrayim" when referring to Egypt, while avoiding the official designation "Palestine" in favor of "Erets-Yisroel."[365] From a typological standpoint, coming to the Land of Israel was for many young Jews a strange kind of travel that hardly had parallels in European travel literature. It was both travel to a distant, exotic, and unknown universe, in many ways opposite to Europe, and at the same time an experience akin to coming to one's own home, coming to oneself.

Thus, at the beginning of his 1925 Erets-Yisroel travelogue, writer and artist Shmuel Raskin mentions that he has decided to bring nothing on the trip: "none of my favorite books without which I never used to be able to leave" (Raskin 9). About to realize his old dream, Raskin embarks on his journey "*vi got hot mikh bashafn*" (9-10). For his ultimate destination is not so much the land of Israel as it is his own self: "*Ikh for keyn Erets-Yisroel zikh aleyn tsu gefinen*" (Raskin 9).

Traveling to the ancient homeland meant coming to the source of the essence over one's identity as a Jew, to the beginnings, to the origins of where and how it all began. Thus, visiting such a place was a fundamental act of exploring and confronting essential aspects of one's Jewish identity. This centrality comes out prominently in the following passage from Sholem Asch's 1911 travelogue:

[365] Mishkovski, *Etyopye: yidn in Afrike un Azye*, 3.


אוּן מִיר שׁטֶעהען אויף דער אוּיבּער־דעק פֿוּן שׁיף אוּן קוּ־
קען צוּ דיר, בּאַרג לבנון...
זיי געגריסט, זון איבּער מיין היים!
זיי געגריסט אוּן זיי געבּענשט, היים!
ווי שטאָלץ בּין איך אויף דיר, איך, דיין פֿערוואָגלטע, אוּנ־
רוהיג קינד, איך דיר, בּאַרג לבנון... איך בּין געקוּמען צוּ דיר
מיין יחוס זוכּען... איך בּין געקוּמען צוּ דיר מיין שׁטאַם געפֿי־
נען — פֿוּן וואַנען קוּם איך? ווער בּין איך?
דו, ווינקעל פֿוּן מיין היים, אויף דיר האָבּען מיינע עלטערן
שׁפּאַצירט אין זייער חתן־כּלה־צייט..."[366]

> We are standing on the upper deck of the ship and are looking toward you, Mount Lebanon… Greetings to you, sun over my home! Be greeted and be blessed, home! How proud I am of you—I, your exiled/wandering/homeless restless child—of you, Mount Lebanon… I have come to you to search for my lineage… I have come to you to discover my origin – where do I come from? Who am I? You, corner of my home, on you my parents would walk as bride and groom!

Which parents does he have in mind in this passage? His real parents were East European Jews who did not come from the land of Israel. Is he talking in metaphorical terms about his parents' special relationship with that place through their engagement with Jewish tradition? More likely, he means his ancient Jewish lineage, the biblical patriarchs without whom Jewish culture and identity would be unthinkable.

For the Jewish youth in the early twentieth century that had largely broken with traditional Jewish lifestyle, coming to that ancient place associated with deeply ingrained notions of Jewishness could mean a revolutionary act of rebellion against the older generation – as far as the Zionist project was concerned – but it could also mean a return and even reconciliation with the traditional Jewish world of their parents and grandparents. For being in the land of Israel with all of its biblical associations brought back the world of their childhood, when they were first told and taught about biblical imagery and geography. Gedalye Bublik makes this feature explicit, when, in the middle of describing his journey to the Middle East, he suddenly switches attention to distant memories from childhood study, recreating a lesson with his melamed:

[366] Asch 1911: 16.

די גרענעצען פון ארץ־ישראל וועז די
אידן וועלען אהין אריין. דער רבי זאגט
און מיר זאגען נאך וואדט פאר וואדט:
וגבול— און דער גרענעץ, ים— פון מערב
זייט, יהיה— און עס וועט זיין, לכם—
צו אייך, הים הגדול — דער גרויסער ים,
וגבול — דער גרענעץ, זה יהיה— דאס
וועט זיין, לכם — צו אייך, גבול ים—
דער גרענעץ פון מערב זייט.[367]

ער איז מיר ניט פרעמד אט דיעזער
מיטעלענדישער, איך האב פון איהם
געלערנט נאך איידער איך האב גע־
וואוסט וואס עם הייסט געאגראפיע. א
קינד בין איך נאך געווען און געזעסען
בין איך אין א קלייניע שטיבעלע און
דער רבי האט מיט אונז געלערנט איז
חומש ווי אזוי נאט דערט צו משה און
ער זאגט איהם ווי אזוי עם וועלען זיין

> The Mediterranean is no stranger to me, I had learned about it before I even knew what geography was. I was only a child and was sitting in a tiny room, and the melamed taught us the Torah, how God speaks to Moses, and He tells him what the borders of the land of Israel will be, when Jews enter it. The melamed says and we repeat word after word: *u-gvul* – "and the border," *yam* – from the western border, *yihye* – and it will be, *lakheym* – to you, *hayam hagodol* – "the great sea," *u-gvul* – "the border," *ze yihye* – "this will be," *lakheym* – "to you," *gvul yam* – "the western border."

These words are deeply ingrained in his memory—he gives no source, but any reader from a similar background would recognize this verse.[368] The revelatory power of the travelogue, and of the travel writing in general, comes to full expression here, as impressions about the present are shown to be inextricably linked to one's personal experiences from the past. The *here and now* is contrasted with the *then and there*, and the two inform each other in ways that advance the writers' understanding of their identities and leads them into new potentially illuminating spaces.

[367] 12.

[368] Numbers 34:6. Bublik (or possibly the typesetter) made a mistake in the third word of this verse from and wrote "יהיה" instead of the alternative form "והיה".

The power of Erets-Yisroel also consisted in its centrality to all Jews, regardless of their ideology or communal history: it meant something to everyone. Therefore, visiting Erets-Yisroel, despite the country's lack of political independence, involved a reunion of sorts with the entire variety of the Jewish people worldwide. The description of a journey to Mount Meron in the anonymous short article "*A rayze nokh Meron*" is a perfect example of the merging of Zionist, traditionalist, and nationalist themes. The article's engagement with the subject of boundaries between the old and the new, personal and communal, male and female, make analyzing it a convenient way of reviewing some of the key aspects of modern Yiddish travelogues about the Land of Israel. Signed "*A rayznder*" (an obvious pseudonym, literally meaning "A Traveler," under which a number of articles were published in various Yiddish periodicals, all dealing with travel to various destinations), this piece presents coaches taking passengers to Meron as reflecting the entire diversity of the Jewish world. The list the author supplies is of great interest, as it enumerates nearly every version of a Jewish identity from that period; a map of the cultural, political, and professional spectrum with various elements of which a Jewish traveler would have encounters and or personal identifications:

עס איז געווען א כישכאש פון
אלערלייי מענשען: אשכנזים, ספרדים,
כתבגדים, חסידים, פרומע, פריע, מאנסבילען,
ווייבער, תלמידי־חכמים און פראסטע אידען,
רבנים, שוחטים, משולחים, גבאים, קאלעקטאר
מען, פרעלים, לעהרער און אנדערעלייי
משביל'ישע כלי־קודש. בקצור עס איז נים
געווען איין איד אין דער וועלט וואס האט
אהער פון זיך אן עקזעקוטאר כוח געשיקט.
אלע לענדער, אלע וועלט־געגענדען האבען
דא זייערע פארשטעהער געהאט.[369]

It was a mishmash of people of all sorts: Ashkenazim, Sephardim, Misnagdim [opponents of Hasidism], Hasidim, religious people, secular people, men, women, Torah scholars and uneducated people, rabbis, ritual slaughterers, emissaries,

[369] A Rayze nokh Meron, Kemfer 1906.

> synagogue administrators, colonists, workers, teachers, and all kinds of maskilic religious figures. In short, there was not a Jew in the world that had not sent a sample of himself here. Every country and every world border were represented.

This article also illustrates the constant impulse to look for hints and signs of one's being in the land of the Tanakh, Talmud, and Midrashic literature and to connect one's immediate impressions and observations with the abstract Erets-Yisroel absorbed through heder and yeshiva education and prayers. One's entire upbringing is relevant here, as is, indeed, the Yiddish language itself, which through various idioms reflects the centrality of Jerusalem and Erets-Yisroel in Jewish culture. The majority of Yiddish readers would have been aware of the Talmudic allusion behind the article's mention of the "*shakal*" (jackal) and the "*fukslekh*" (little foxes) that "*makhn zikh klogedik*" (that are howling) and "*veynen afn khurbn-beys-hamikdesh*" (weep at the destruction of the Temple). Given the overall context, one would be instantly reminded of the famous Talmudic story about Rabbi Akiva and his students witnessing a wild fox running through the site of the Holy of Holies at the ruins of the Temple.[370]

The chance to encounter representatives of Jewish communities from all over the world meant that for Jewish travelers to Erets-Yisroel, the journey was also an opportunity to experience the world's Jewish diversity without having to travel to scores of other countries. A central theme of this text is the great divide between the German Jews and the Ostjuden (East European Jews), as reflected in the various remarks of the travelers. In fact, the terms *yidn* (Jews) and *yidishe* (Jewish) are reserved for the Yiddish-speaking East European Jews, while the other ones are referred exclusively as "*di daytshn*" (the Germans). While *daytsh* was a common term for an emancipated Jew who had adopted Gentile ways and exchanged his traditional garb and sidelocks for a modern suit, the persistence of this opposition in this article leaves no doubt as to

[370] (Makkot 24b).

the author's intention to convey the utter estrangement between the two groups. A characteristic example is provided in the article's description of an American Jewish visitor's triumphant speech directed to his wife, when they find out that Petach Tikva belongs to their fellow *yidn*: "*Du herst, alte, tantsn darf men, du herst, nit keyn daytshn, yidishe iz es, du zest, alte, ale felder dort, di hayzer, di beymer, di apelsinen, alts yidishe – vos zitstu vi a goylem – du herst, yidishe, alte – iz zi groys, Petakh-Tikva*." (Do you hear, wife, we should be dancing, do you hear? Not German, it is Jewish, you see, wife, all the fields over there, the houses, the trees, the orange groves—everything is Jewish – why are you sitting like a golem [i.e. fool] – can you hear, Jewish, wife – Petach Tikva is big…) The rabbi's excitement leads him to pledge a fundraising effort in America for the sake of acquiring more land for Jews in Erets-Yisroel. He reacts similarly to the mention of the land owned by "*di araber, di kristn*" (the Arabs, the Christians)—there is no fundamental difference to him.

The author does not express his own opinion, which, we may safely assume, was far more tolerant: his intention is to convey the view of the more traditional and parochial Jews—which he does without criticism, but rather with a kind of warmth and slight humor for his own people, so deeply rooted in their traditional outlook and so sensitive to the foreignness and inauthenticity of the European ways. For he, too, as a modern writer, has something in common with the "German," and is feeling nostalgic and romantic about his more traditional brethren. Hence the idealized romanticized folksy image of the American rabbi, who, he is quick to clarify, is "*a rov ba rusishe yidn dort*" (a rabbi of Russian Jews there): "*a frish, freylekh yidl, kimat a khosid*. *Es tantst un zingt in im di yidishkeyt; er iz kuloy simkhe, hislayves*" (a fresh, happy little Jew, almost a Hasid. Yidishkeyt dances and sings in him; he is full of joy and enthusiasm). This character embodies the essence of the East European *yidishkeyt*, as a festive

positive energy, which finds itself in a state of harmonious unity with the natural and mystical power of Erets-Yisroel. It is the character of the American rabbi that is chosen to convey a traveler's fascination with the exceptional beauty and overall uniqueness of Erets-Yisroel compared to the rest of the world: "*ikh hob shoyn shive-yamim gezen – aza – nokh nit"* (I've seen the Seven Seas, but such a thing – never before). The Hebraic "shive-yomim" makes this statement agree with the general spirit of the article: that of celebrating the eternal continuity of the ancient Biblical past and the present. To do that most effectively, the author relies on someone more traditional than himself, and the rabbi suits him perfectly.

For as a secular Yiddish intellectual, the article's author is aware that the lack of religious continuity with the past generations would prevent him from being able to experience a personal connection to Erets-Yisroel that would feel as deep, authentic, and, importantly, *communal*. For in order to overcome the potentially subversive secular element, he might have to opt for an overtly individualist approach, as the romantic Jewish poet-troubadour Itzik Manger does in his "*Kh'vel nit kushn dayn shtoyb*" (I will not kiss your dust)—a poem that at the same time romanticizes, modernizes, secularizes, and spiritualizes the subject of the eternal Jewish longing for Erets-Yisroel. But it is the rabbi who can recite *Tikn-Khtsos* (an after-midnight prayer containing the theme of mourning for the Temple), following it with a satisfied exclamation reminiscent of someone who has just had a delicious meal: "*ay, iz dos a tikn-khtsos geven*" (Ay, this was one delicious Tikn-Khtsos). In a slightly humorous tone, the article repeatedly reports moments that reveal religious impulses awakening in the more secular travelers, as when one of the passengers in the coach, reacting to the relief of a cool breeze, desires to know which "*vos far a brokhe me darf . . . makhn*" (which blessing one should recite) over it. The notion of the breeze's holy nature is further stressed by the article's narrator who describes it as if coming

from “ganeydn” (paradise). It is the more traditional Jew’s response that calls the reader’s attention to the slightly exaggerated and hence comical aspect of this passion for religious feelings induced by the landscape of the Promised Land: “*Af a vint makht men nit keyn brokhe. Es iz nit keyn maykhl*” (You don’t say a blessing over the wind. It’s not a dish).

Even such travel descriptions that have little explicitly *political* content, the possibility of *renewal* and *liberation* often occupies a central position. Finding oneself within the eternally relevant Jewish space and outside the East European environment is linked to a long list of impressions suggestive of opportunities for personal, cultural and national rejuvenation and reinvention. One of the most symbolically charged manifestations of this potential is the Hebrew language, whose revival further stresses the *oxymoronic* nature of the young ancient Jewish space. The reference to Hebrew-speaking children in “*A rayze nokh Meron*” is characteristic: “*Es klingen alte verter, fun an alte libe shprakh in di yunge maylekhlekh. Un es dukht zikh dir az glaykh mit zey verstu oykh yung, az du lebst in a naye yunge land, in di tsaytn ven di shprakh un dos folk vos hot zi geredt zaynen nokh yung geven.*” (Ancient words are sounding, from the old dear language in the young little mouths. And it seems to you that together with them you become young, and you live in a new young country, in the time when the language the people that spoke it are once again young.) The article also brings up another theme related to the notion of liberation, i.e. the potential for greater freedom for women. The pilgrims’ encounter with a group of local Jewish girls chattering in Hebrew makes the European women ecstatic, with one of them immediately taking a stab at her husband, whose Hebrew skills, she claims are far inferior: “*Alter [...] redt nit azoy gut shabes vi zey in der vokhn*” (My husband […] doesn’t speak it so well on Shabbat, as they do during the week). Another female passenger then makes an even more provocative comment challenging the male dominance in the religious sphere: “*Es iz*

dokh a mekhaye, zey veln dokh mitn reboyno-shel-oylem kenen reydn, nit darfn dem mans laske" (How wonderful, they will be able to speak to the Lord of the Universe, without needing their husbands' favors). Far from making these women more submissive to the male patriarchal authority, the biblical surroundings are shown to actually inspire a feminist-like mood.

To complete the picture, the article also brings up the phenomenon of Jewish agricultural pioneers, the *khalutsim*, who have been able to reconnect with nature through their physical work. One of the reasons for this subject's special significance is its unifying power, for it held appeal both to secular and religious commentators and even earned some praise from Communist-leaning Jewish socialists who were otherwise deeply skeptical of the Zionist project. It is notable that in his admiration of Erets-Yisroel's nature, the American rabbi in "A rayze nokh Meron" speaks negatively not only of Russia, but of the "golden land" of America as well: "*In Rusland, vos iz do tsu zen, goyishe felder? Nu, zitst men in beys-medreshin shtub. M'hot moyre aroystsugeyn a bisl in feld. [...] In Amerike verstu gor dershtikt in di hoykhe vent, dem himl zet men nit aroys. [...] M'loyft, m'horevet, m'zet di velt nit*" (In Russia, what is there to see, Gentile fields? So you sit in the bet midrash. Afraid to venture into the fields even for a bit. […] In America you get suffocated in the high walls, you can't see the sky. […] One runs, one toils, one doesn't see the world). It is in Erets-Yisroel that according to him the Jew is naturally impelled to connect with the natural world, including the animals, mountains, and "*apelsinen-beymer*" (orange trees) and to experience the spiritually loaded landscape, all of whose elements "*mesaprim kvod-el*" (speak of God's greatness).

2. Leyb Malakh and His Shadow

A key figure in Yiddish travel writing about Palestine is the prominent poet, playwright, and travel writer Leyb Malakh (1894–1936), born Leib Zaltsman in Zwoleń, Poland. Deeply steeped in traditional culture and learning in his youth, he received a traditional education in heder, from his grandfather, and in *beysmedresh*, becoming an assistant to a melamed in his young teens. Later, however, as is typical of his generation of writers, he distanced himself from his religious and cultural roots, embracing Marxism and secular Western European culture. The interplay of his multilayered identity as a Marxist idealist, an East European Jew, and as a *Jew* shape his experience of and writing about Palestine as a possible home.

From the outset of Malakh's travelogue, we are aware of the author's secular identity: he informs us in the very first sentence of the book's preface that the time of his arrival in Palestine was on New Year's Eve. The calendar according to which it is the cusp of the year is clearly not the Jewish one: the holiday of Rosh Hashanah is yet months away. Malakh operates instead by the common Christian calendar; his life and his existence are synchronized with mainstream Western clock. His temporality does not accord with that of his parents and his family's earlier generations, who lived according to a calendar whose reckoning of the year began with the creation of the world.

Malakh and the authors of other similar travelogues were not tourists, nor business people, refugees nor immigrants. The majority of authors whose works are examined in this dissertation were professional writers. Most published books, contributed to literary journals, or contributed to the Yiddish press; and many did all of these things. The way they thought of themselves, their task, and their mission clearly affected how they perceived the world around them and influenced the way they presented themselves to people they met while traveling. Within this loose group of non-touristic travel writers, there existed subcategories of travel

writing as well: journalists making a short visit to a destination experimented first with short and purely journalistic pieces, rather than the more "literary" works occasionally disparaged by more serious *literary* travelers. These writers had a lower status within the world of Yiddish travel writing. Malakh specifically emphasizes his more superior position: it was not as a "journalistic tourist" that he came to Palestine, he asserts.[371]

Malakh makes his ideological position apparent in the first few paragraphs of first chapter. Therein, he describes his time on the ship from the Port of Constanţa to the shores of the Holy Land, making use of some revealing politically charged key terms: capitalist, worker, and, especially, *class*. Even before arriving in Palestine, he is analyzing its political situation. His first inclination is to do so through Marxist terms and in particular notions of class struggle between the rich and the poor, the former aiming to exploit and the latter struggling for a new fairer social order.

The land of Israel, his destination, is the central spot on the world's "Jewish map," its epicenter. It is the address for past, present, and future, the foundation of traditional Jewishness, and the origin of the texts that he was taught as a child. This is a country where images, words, and names that were part of the education given to him by his parents would come alive—or, perhaps, they would reveal themselves to have been fabricated and untrue. Regardless of their veracity, symbols of Jewish tradition would still be a leitmotif of Malakh's travelogue, as for most Yiddish travelogues about the historical Jewish homeland. The first chapter's opening paragraph already contains elements of both his interest in the present and the eternal, the political (socialist) and the Jewish: "Many of my fellow passengers on the ship *Polonia*, that is now breaking the waves of the black sea and is gliding like a swan into a clear little river, here

[371] Malakh, 3.

between the mountainous shores of the Bosphorus, are holding open their little bibles in different languages, mostly in German. They have already started searching for traces of the prophets, although they are still a journey of almost three days to that land."[372]

It is noteworthy that he does not include himself the category of bible-loving passengers; he makes no mention of having a copy of the *Tanakh*. Indeed, an implicit distinction being made. There is an opposition and an ideological divergence between him and his fellow passengers, in whom Malakh observes a too-premature excitement regarding a place that while yet unseen was constantly before their eyes, in mind and imagination, as the only country in the world that can unquestionably be called their own, a place both entirely familiar yet foreign. One can question to what extent the author was also having these thoughts as he stood aboard the *Polonia*, but in his observation, he conveys his social (and socialist) awareness and his consciousness: he is not a mere tourist looking for entertainment, nor is he a socially ignorant traditionalist, neither representative of the Jewish religious establishment nor of the bourgeoisie. His ambivalence, bordering on sarcasm, with regard to the biblically conscious passengers is already hinted in the diminutive form *tanakhl*. The suffix *–l* can convey tender affection, but it can also be sign of dismissiveness. It is also significant that although he mentions multilingualism (which in Palestine travelogues symbolizes Palestine's status as the gatherer of all the diasporas), there is only one language—German—to which he specifically refers. German-speaking Jews represent a wealthier class, bourgeois and capitalist, that is less inclined toward socialism than East European Jews.

His ideological position is evident in the sequence of metaphors that appear in the first few paragraphs, constructed in a way that makes Malakh's Marxist points seem to flow

[372] Malakh, 5.

naturally: the comparison of the ship *Polonia* to a swan gliding in a river is followed a few paragraphs later by a comparison of the financial capital of the wealthy passengers to "the fish in the river, which need in various ways to procreate, grow, and get richer."[373] He notes that the opposition between "the capitalist" and "the worker" (*poel*) is already apparent on the ship. One specific expression of the gap between the two worlds, the capitalists in the ship's upper two classes and the workers in third class, is of a musical nature: the former are scandalized by the latter's *khutspe* (insolence) in their preference for "The Internationale" over "Hatikvah." The author's admiration for and solidarity with the performers of the Marxist anthem can be clearly felt from his enthusiastic description of a spontaneous outburst as the ship left port: "'The Internationale' broke out from 400 young chests and fell on the waves of the sea, and it reached into the coal sections, heating cellars, and sailors' canteens."[374] Following Malakh's allegiances, the song's route leads to members of the working class, including those in the dark belly of the ship.

He also points out to the reader the Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew, such as it is the Yemenite's "*khakham*" (wise man).[375] Malakh indicates his awareness of the allure of the exotic for the European, as well as for many of his readers; but when he describes Tel Aviv, the object of his praise and the reason for his satisfaction are precisely of the lack of exoticism:

> Tel Aviv makes an especially pleasant impression on those who come from distant countries. . . . I have an impression that I have already seen Tel Aviv somewhere on the paths of my wandering. It seems to me when I abruptly open my eyes in the side alley, that I've already seen this corner. Where? Probably in Los Angeles, in San Francisco, and Mexico, in Rio de Janeiro. . . . There it seemed very exotic.

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[373] Ibid.

[374] Malakh, 6.

[376] Malakh, 20.

> Here in the Near East, in the subtropical climate, I don't see any sign of exoticism. This is actually a healthy quality.[376]

For Malakh, one of the main criteria for evaluating a city is the extent to which it conforms to Western standards of *the big city* "*groysshtot*."[377] Even when describing the city's architecture and its different "stylized styles," he is satisfied that they do not include the "Orientalist."[378] Malakh, the inveterate and indefatigable traveler, does not espouse the romanticized idea of the exotic authenticity of the non-European. Rather, he is fully on the side of progress. Neither his experience in exotic non-European countries nor his witnessing of the Zionist attempt to revive the ancient Jewish past, with its non-European, "Orientalist" connotations, changes his allegiance to Europe, America, and the West. Malakh's journey to the land of Israel is not motivated by a desire to reinvent or Orientalize himself. Palestine rather reinforces his Europeanness. In his view, his fellow Jews are, too, European, and they expose their European nature by demonstrating so compellingly their ability to remain Europeans in the midst of Oriental exoticism. If these Jews were indeed strangers in Europe, if they really were "Orientals," then here in Palestine they would have readily revealed their true nature, for here they should be liberated to be themselves, freed from the need to pretend. In this regard, it is critical for Malakh to point out that is a place that is alive, growing, and developing. The people who have arrived here not visitors or tourists: they are creating a society and a country. He thus includes colorful descriptions of construction sites, a symbol of the Palestine's creation: "everywhere heaps of clay, lime, bricks, construction sand, iron bars, the ringing and the knocking of the hammer."[379]

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[376] Malakh, 20.

[377] Ibid.

[378] Ibid.

[379] Ibid.

As a travel writer, Malakh understands well the connotations of the places about which he writes and the expectations of his readers. Certainly, he is aware of the Western Wall as the epicenter, the heart, and the central nerve of the Jewish heritage in Palestine and the implications of his choices regarding whether and how he includes an account of his visit there. He cannot omit it; or rather, being silent about the destination would itself be a significant statement. Given the significance of the monument, it is potentially the one place with the power to effect Malakh's reconnection with his deep Jewish roots from childhood and to elicit in him a pledge of his allegiance to the eternal Jewish soul. Malakh intentionally defies such expectation. In one of the book's most telling passages, he adamantly refuses to admire the Western Wall and to be one of those Jewish people empowered by this symbol of the Jewish past, with its strong connotations of the current national revival and political struggle as well as its promise for a Jewish future:

> What am I feeling right now standing at the Western Wall? Nothing. Merely the pleasant feeling of a tourist . . . exotic . . . a preserved piece of antiquity embodied in a physical object. Does it seem to all the people here that are standing as if transformed into stone statues with outstretched arms, as if desiring to embrace the wall, as if it can hear them, understand them? It's hard to say.[380]

What does it mean "to feel nothing" at this uniquely important site? As one of the chief symbols of Judaism and Jewish history (especially its tragic 2000 years of exile) and thus a place where the sense of Jewish solidarity would be most naturally experienced, does a feeling of immunity to the site's potency equate to a rejection of one's Jewishness? For Malakh, such questions are beyond consideration, for what is critically important for him is yet a different wall: a nearly impervious wall that he constructs between his West-oriented Yiddishism and others' East-oriented Zionism. He shall not compromise his core values: the humanist-socialist

[380] Malakh, 40.

rejection of nationalism and a wariness of chauvinism, exclusivity, war, and exoticism. For a man whose appreciation of Tel Aviv is predicated on his perception of the lack of exoticism, the Wall is an alien place, monument, and symbol.

A closer examination of his language further reveals his position. While claiming first that he feels nothing, the sentence that follows mentions the "pleasant feeling of a tourist." One must conclude, then, that by "feeling nothing," he intends to convey that the kind of fervent reaction that his readers may expect. Rhetorically, then, this becomes a crucial statement in the book—a manifesto. His political agenda here is as present as ever, especially in the perceptible dislike with which he writes about "the Uncle Moseses from America who . . . exploit the children of Israel in the harshest manner."[381] He describes the crowd at the Wall on the eve of the Sabbath as "an interesting exhibition of colors and manners."[382] In the parade of all the different kinds of Jews, he instantly knows which type he belongs to, and not just he low, but his readers as well, simply by virtue of creating is this text. Hence his description of the Polish Jews' language as *heymish* (homey)—a term he does not use for the rest of the backgrounds on the list: "the Sephardim, the Bucharans, the Jemenites."[383] At one point he describes the crowd at the western wall as "a mixture of Galicia and the Orient."[384]

Malakh's Jerusalem is full of shadows, which carry a number of important connotations, related both to the pervasive presence of the past's complicated legacy and to the moral dilemmas and ambiguities that he identifies in Palestine's present. The passages involving

[381] Ibid.

[382] Malakh, 20.

[383] Malakh, 40.

[384] Ibid.

shadows are among some of the most poetic in this work, and it is clear that the image of the shadow is a highly attractive metaphor for the author. He describes the arrival of the worshippers at the Wall on a Friday night thus: "the narrow space . . . is becoming more and more packed. The first to arrive are the shadows, and then emerge the figures of the people."[385] The book's shadow theme represents not only the frequently oppressive presence of the many centuries of Jewish history but also the spatial dimension of Jewish life (i.e., the worldwide dispersion along with its striking diversity). The connotations of the shadow in general and for Malakh in particular are numerous: mystery, danger, death, silence, anonymity or unidentifiability, a double (or even a mocking echo), and—one of Malakh's most frequent uses—the theme of distortion and inversion and, by extension, corruption and ugliness and degeneration.

Given Malakh's disparaging view of "religious fanaticism" and outdated impractical superstition, there is a clear sense of disapproval in his description, which immediately follows the statements quote above on the emerging shadows, of the behavior and appearance of a group of "hoary old men and young people from the Yeshiva" as "a heavy shaking, a contorted moving and grimacing, an ascetic torturing of oneself."[386] He appears to view this peculiar diversity as expressions of a Jewish lack of stability and an absence of clear and unified goals that would be aligned with his high esteem for modern progress and the class struggle against the greed of capitalism and for social justice. It is only natural that such expressions are described using the theme of dark and contorted shadows: "And the shadows of the now walking people are running ahead, inverted, tall, disappear in the twisted ornaments of the mosques, churches, and

[385] Malakh, 41.

[386] Ibid.

synagogues, and blend with the shadow of antiquity that lies in wait there everywhere in their path, that leads its eternal life in the cracks and in the ledges."[387]

The book's leitmotif of the shadow reaches its culmination in the final section, which is rich in sophisticated literary allusion. There can hardly be any doubt that this section, entitled "A Dialogue Between Me and My Shadow," draws its basic structure, imagery, and symbolism from the famous short story, "The Shadow," by the nineteenth-century Danish author of fairy tales and travelogues (among other genres), Hans Christian Andersen. Common elements and parallels between the two works are numerous, and this final section feels in many ways like a separate work inserted into the travelogue. The different prose style, which is more literary and tale-like, is apparent from the opening sentence: "This happened on an evening, a Jerusalem evening in early March."[388]

The section is replete with descriptions of nature: the natural environment, in which the narrator (presumably Malakh) finds himself, reflects the internal shifts in his mood and psychological state—a device and pattern frequently used in fiction. The behavior of nature imparts a sense of disquiet and even forebodes an imminent danger. Malakh draws an image of an approaching thunderstorm, but there is, importantly, a degree of ambiguity regarding the extent to which humans may have contributed to creating this natural event. Thus, he wonders whether the distant rumbling he hears are sounds of thunder or the explosions of rocks being mined. When rain suddenly begins to fall, he likens the raindrops to a machine gun attack on soldiers in the trenches.[389]

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[387] Ibid.

[388] Malakh, 255.

[389] Ibid.

This section also contains an account of the lonely walk that Malakh took from Jerusalem, setting out from the campus of the Hebrew University on Har Hatzofim, in an attempt to reach the shores of the Dead Sea. The tone is reminiscent of romantic Yiddish texts that employ the figure of the lonely wanderer. Malakh similarly emphasizes the themes of loneliness, forsakenness, moodiness, and the mysterious forces of nature acting in concert with the hero: "I was now . . . walking all alone through the mountainous side paths, lured there by the vision of the nearby lights, which were flickering by the shores of the Dead Sea."[390] He soon realizes that he is lost, having greatly underestimated the distance. But, characteristically, he voluntary relinquishes control as he lets the Dead Sea *farkishefn* (bewitch) him.[391] (It is telling that Malakh chooses to put this verb in quotation arks, as if his rationalist Marxist *Weltanschauung* does not permit him to take such notions seriously.)

This final section is a resume, a highly concentrated piece of text in which every theme, doubt, point of praise, or criticism are represented. In it, the author takes stock of his time in the land of Israel in the quintessentially Jewish format of a dialogue—a format that allows Malakh to convey the complexity and inconclusiveness of his impressions—and, perhaps, to diminish the need for or apparent lack of his commitment to a single point of view. It bears a striking resemblance to Andersen's work. The experience is similarly clouded, uncertain, and dreamlike, whose symbolism suggests an internal conflict in which the opposing voices in the polyphony of one's consciousness acquire separate identities:

> From me, from my body, a mass somehow separated, as if my skin had by itself gotten peeled off. The skin had the shape of a cloud of smoke, or of the shadow of smoke. It was moving and was reaching high up. From the height it sat back down and acquired shape, the shape of a human being, A silhouette, and stretched itself

[390] Ibid., 256.

[391] Ibid., 257.

> on the sloping stones next to me. From the shape of the silhouette, I recognized instantly that this was my shadow, my very own shadow.[392]

There is an element of slight horror in such an encounter, which can be felt distinctly in such sentences as: "And suddenly I hear a voice. It is however rather muffled, as if it were not teen coming from next and from some hollow rock. What frightened me even more was that the voice was like my own echo. The shadow of my voice."[393] There is undoubtedly something inherently uncomfortable about the notion of meeting one's own shadow—or rather, oneself, as may be concluded given the numerous hints given by Malakh. Although the text contains such positive references to the shadow as "my closest and most devoted travel companion,"[394] the encounter with one's own shadow has well-established associations in Western literature: it is the quintessential symbolic moment of self-alienation. This experience of perceiving oneself from the outside is not an exercise in self-awareness but rather a moment in which one's self functions as a separate entity, which then theoretically enters a dialogue with the self to which it is in some paradoxical way both identical and opposed.

There is, at the same time, a humorous element to this encounter. For example, the shadows apologizes, "pardon," for saying" "you" instead of "we."[395] The ultimate question arrives, the unavoidable quintessential challenge to define one's identity, to pledge allegiance to a specific place to which one can belong fully: "Would you like to stay here in the land of Israel for good?"[396] By this point in the text, the reader does not expect a quick and categorical

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[392] Ibid., 258.

[393] Ibid., 259.

[394] Ibid., 260.

[395] Ibid.

[396] Malakh, 265.

answer—there are too many contradictions, ambiguities, and unreconciled issues. Answering immediately would not make sense: "his question confused me a bit. I didn't answer right away."[397] The shadow's logic is very compelling: "I know that for your personally this isn't an issue. After New York and Paris, one cannot settle down. Especially such an eccentric person as you, who is used to crossing a country by express train in three to four days, to read with a deep breath. There isn't enough scope and grandiousity here."[398] The shadow's voice becomes increasingly more seductive; it seems to know exactly which buttons to push, which deep internal desires and needs to appeal to: "Where are the Yiddishists who would take the spiritually robbed masses under their wings? Why didn't the immigration wave bring along the Yiddish writers, journalists, essayists, playwrights, actors, and poets, who would make a beginning here, just like they have done in America, Argentina, Africa? I have no doubt that they would find a better and a more natural soil here then in other places of immigration."[399] When the narrator appears to be regretting typing able to commit to this project, the shadow goes on the attack: "Who is not letting you? Who is preventing you? You could have a share in this work of creation, so that, along with all the others, you will be able to exclaim proudly, 'This is the road that I paved. This is the house that I helped build, these are the rocks that I carried on my shoulders.' It's a pleasant feeling."[400] The problems he mentions are about "*shver zikh oyslebn do*" (Malakh 266). He mentions "*shprakh, kultur*" (Malakh 266). He admits that it will now be much harder than had the process started earlier. Nevertheless, his position is clear: "*Kh'bin*

[397] Ibid.

[398] Malakh, 266.

[399] Malakh, 269.

[400] Malakh, 266–267.

zikher, az farn yidishn vort volt do geven di beste heym. Erets-yisroel volt gaystik geshtanen in kontakt mit gor der velt in zin fun kultur un shafung" (270, emphasis in original). (I'm certain that for the Yiddish word is put hear be the best *home*. The land of Israel would be spiritually in touch with the rest of the world in terms of culture and creativity.) The mention of the rise of modern education in Palestine is also significant: "You think that the Hebrew University is not yet a University? Agreed. But a shape is already there. Did you see the scope? . . . Sooner or later the building will get filled with content."

He thus lays the blame primarily on the Yiddish elite. He suggests that even in Eastern Europe, the YIVO in Vilna, for example, would benefit from the passionate conviction of the Hebrew "*fanatiker*."[401] He does point out the mixture of the ancient and the new as an attractive feature, the features and approaches of modern times combined curiously with elements from *One Thousand and One Nights* "*in aza farkishefter velt*."[402] Indeed, Malakh thanks in return to himself, and enters a debate with himself, and, appropriately for the place, he enters battle reminiscent, as he points out: "I may yet, like Jacob with the Angel, fight here my own shadow, which separated from me and is now sitting (or lying) at my side."[403] He informs the reader that he has had many other encounters with his shadow, "*un oft mol—mit dem shotn fun mayn shotn*" (and frequently, with my shadow's shadow), but that those encounters were never productive as they would be interrupted by the sudden entering of a source of light.[404] The complete darkness of this moonless Jerusalem evening allows this encounter to be incomparably more fruitful:

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[401] Ibid., 270.

[402] Ibid., 266.

[403] Ibid., 258.

[404] Malakh, 258.

"What person is after all not used to his own shadow, especially someone who likes losing oneself, in order to . . . find oneself."[405] All of a sudden, the progressive rationalist Malakh reveals a very different side of himself in the special environment of this land. He suddenly erupts with a flood of powerful images, including many deeply rooted in Jewish traditions and in the Bible. In this distant place, Malakh seems to suggest, there is good excuse to step off the straight path of scientific knowledge, since the local air may have special power and perhaps contains the prophets' "visions."[406]

And as he prepares to offer another set of well-reasoned answers, his shadow disappears, as if dissolving into the beautiful scene of awakening nature: "golden fountains" and the "radiating blueness" of the sky.[407] Malakh's travelogue thus concludes in images, not words—whether because he chooses to forego language or because he has no conclusion. One thing is, however, evident: Malakh ends his travelogue on a positive note, conveying a sense of potential, possibility, and a brighter future—a conclusion for which a Marxist-Messianic Jew would naturally long.

Malakh sees great potential and is quick to notices the progress made, albeit in a partial and unsatisfying fashion. He is pleased to see streets bearing the names of important Yiddish writers: "*a 'rkhov Perets,' a Frishman-gas, a Sholem-Aleykhem-gas.*"[408] He quickly stresses, however, this isn't enough: right now the entire Yiddish world is celebrating the anniversary since Sholem Aleichem began writing, since he laid the foundation of Yiddish literature. The

[405] Ibid., 258.

[406] Ibid., 259.

[407] Ibid., 271.

[408] Ibid., 21.

world is celebrating, but in Tel Aviv, where there is a Sholem Aleichem Street, they forgot to celebrate! And the same goes for the death anniversary of Peretz, the same for Mendele Moykher-Sforim . . . .[409]

With the sheer amount of room Malakh devotes to discussing the state of the Yiddish literary creativity, the actions and supposed duties of Yiddish writers, their role within politics and social struggle—areas in which Malakh is particularly engaged—it clearly emerges that the central, most active component of Malakh's Jewish identity (which in his case is inextricably linked to social, artistic, spiritual, etc.) is his Yiddishism, an ideology, movement, set of ideas, that combine the prioritization of the Yiddish language in cultural and everyday life with socialist, political agenda. As he finds himself in that uniquely Jewish space, the land of Israel, which Malakh himself describes as being "magical," his mind is filled with a diverse array of associations that speak to various layers of his Jewish identity, including those deeply buried in the subconscious, as well as those that provoke resistance and outright total and hostile rejection. The one thing that most consistently provokes his negative reaction and becomes the chief point of contention is Zionism's antipathy to Yiddish. There is too much at stake for Malakh; his life is too full of various associations with and dependencies on Yiddish cultural institutions and its milieu to relinquish Yiddish or to accept his marginalization because of his commitment to Yiddish.

His solution—the only logical one—in the final section of his travelogue is to advocate for the elevation of Yiddish's status in Palestine. This avenue allows him to reconcile his linguistic, literary, cultural, social, and institutional loyalties with Palestine's promise of personal *geule* (deliverance) and a *home*, including a life in the national homeland with all the attributes

[409] Malakh, 21.

of a “normal” national existence. However complicated and burdened by doubt and inherent inconsistencies, the yearning for both, which has defined Yiddish and Jewish culture, is at the heart of Yiddish travel literature.

His present reality is, in fact, a state of homelessness. The language he speaks and the Yiddish culture in which he has grown up, both an integral part of his identity, are foreign to Israel. This Jewish “homeland” thus does not fulfill the promise of a complete Jewish present, no matter its status as the Jewish past and potentially the Jewish future.

At the same time, his time in Palestine does not in any way diminish his engagement with the struggles and ideologies within the modern Jewish life and his relationship with his colleagues and same thinkers and his impressions from Palestine contain concentrated moments of all the main moments and issues of the modern Jewish life, all the dilemmas and conflicts including those in which he is eager or forced to take sides in that sense whatever his answer to the question of whether Palestine and the Zionist project of national revival suits him well, whatever his answer Palestine proves its relevance and irrefutable relevance to him as far as his Jewish identity is concerned.

Chapter 5.

Presences and Absences: In the Aftermath of World War II

1. Home Lost and Remembered: Homecomings and Pilgrimages

The notion of travel in the immediate postwar years from 1945 until the early 1950s was often linked to mourning, preservation, and memorialization. The enormous changes wrought by World War II shifted Yiddish travel literature's focus inward, prompting it to focus on its own world of Yiddish and rendering most other geographic and cultural destinations marginal. The sources from that period reveal that while earlier travel writing focused on adventure, exploration, and political struggle, texts of the postwar decade reevaluate the personal and communal past. The complex relationship with the pre-Holocaust physical and mental space that these writings exhibit is characterized by a tension between permanent severance on the one hand and continuous identification on the other.

The subject of memory dominates postwar Yiddish travel writing, and addresses the methodological problems of distinguishing between travelogues and memoirist (or memorial) literature. Of particular significance is the notion of sanctification, or the transformation of Jewish Eastern Europe into a sacred space, akin to the traditional status of the land of Israel: lost, remote, inalienable, eternal. In his early-1950s travelogue of Poland, Yiddish writer Mordkhe Tsanin's reflects on his changed perspective of the now-vanished world, using imagery and vocabulary that are highly revealing: *"Mir hobn keyn mol nisht vi geherik opgeshatst, vos dos poylishe yidntum hot mit zikh forgeshtelt. Der vister gerangl farn kiyem, di togteglekhe mi un maternish farn guf un far der neshome, hobn farshtelt di groyskeyt, vos iz geshafn gevorn yedn*

tog, yede sho in der klenster yidisher kehile afile."[410] (We had never properly appreciated the nature of Polish Jewry. The desperate struggle for existence, the daily labor, and the physical and emotional pain prevented us from seeing the greatness that characterized every day and every hour even in the smallest Jewish communities.) The Hebrew designation Tsanin uses to refer to Poland later in the passage—"*medines-Poyln" (the state of Poland,* modeled after the official name of the State of Israel, "*medines-Yisroel")*—is tantamount to a proclamation of this space's holy status. Tsanin's account and other similar works demonstrate that this phenomenon of memorial reverence made writing about Eastern Europe subject to certain taboos—explicit and unspoken, deliberate and unconscious.

Both prewar and postwar Jewish travel accounts of Eastern Europe tend to present such journeys as explorations of one's own past, as an object of nostalgia and loss. And yet, there are profound differences between works of these two periods, with the subject of memory's inherent elusiveness, partiality, and potential for distortion being especially crucial to the post-Holocaust Yiddish travel writing.

Except for a few publications, mostly in the Americas, Yiddish travel literature came to a virtual standstill during the years of World War Two. A large number of prewar travel writers perished in the Holocaust—to say nothing of all of the *potential* writers (and readers) who fell victim to Nazi genocide. Yet despite the heavy blow dealt to the world of Yiddish, new travel writing began to emerge in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust—mostly in the form of travel accounts of Eastern Europe—and quickly became a major genre of postwar Yiddish literature. From its initial impulse of preservation and its focus on the present, it gradually shifted toward the past and the tasks of memorialization and re-creation. The central position that

[410] Tsanin 1952: 5.

memory plays in the postwar Yiddish travelogue sets it apart from the earlier travel writing and raises a number of methodological questions. In particular, it complicates the boundaries between travelogues and memoirist (and memorial) literature, as much of the prewar travel energy is now transferred to the project of remembering—of mental travel down the labyrinths of one's own memory.

Jewish travel to Eastern Europe in the latter 1940s and early 1950s was fueled by a variety of motivations, including feelings of loss, devastation, and guilt, the desire to see what had become of one's former home, and a sense of the moral duty to record, document, and preserve. The enormity of the destruction resulted in an increased level of self-awareness on the part of the authors about their own writing and, in general, about the travelogue genre and its place in the post-Holocaust world. Khaim Shoshkes—one of the most indefatigable and prolific Yiddish travelers—describes his urge to see what has become of Europe in terms reminiscent of psychoanalysis:

> *Ikh bin vider a mol geven in Eyrope un itst gekumen tsurik tsu di gebentshte gasn fun Nyu-York. Vos zukh ikh dort in yene vayte, ober azoy tif in hartsn ayngebakene lender un shtet fun altn kontinentn? Tsi iz dos nisht a mol der dostoyevski-kompleks in a fardekter forem: nisht nor dem gazlen tsit tsurik tsu plats fun zayn farbrekhn, nor oykh dem korbn*.[411]
>
> I once again traveled to Europe and have now returned to the blessed streets of New York. What do I look for in those countries and cities of the old continent—remote and yet so deeply rooted in my? Is it perhaps sometimes the Dostoevsky complex vice versa: not only is the murderer drawn back to the site of his crime, but so is the victim.

The reverse parallel that Shoshkes draws between his own actions and those of the protagonist of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* implies an uncontrollable, almost pathological, craving—one that has little in common with the "normal" travel he engaged in back in the 1930s.

[411] Shoshkes 1949: 9.

Not only do Yiddish travelogues of the postwar decade question the desire to travel back to Eastern Europe— the very possibility of writing down such experiences is called into question. Describing his visit to the Polish city of Chełm, the noted Yiddish journalist Mordkhe Tsanin suggests a crisis of language: *"Es zaynen nishto keyn verter in der mentshlekher shprakh; es hot nokh biz itst keyn shum dikhter nisht geshafn dos vort, vos zol konen oysdrikn di akhzoryes, mit velkhe di daytshn un di ukrainer hobn zikh ongerukt kegn di elnte un umbavofene khelemer yidn."* (There are no words in the human language; to this day, no poet has created a word that is capable of conveying the brutality with which the Germans and Ukrainians attacked the lonely and unarmed Jews of Chełm.)[412] Tsanin's feeling of the inadequacy of words was shared by many other writers. In contrast to prewar travelogues, whose authors sometimes addressed specific limitations of Yiddish in portrayals of foreignness and exoticism, the challenge that Tsanin refers to has little to do with characteristics of any particular language—in the face of the new unspeakable horrors all languages become equal.

Tsanin's trip emerges as a torturous ordeal—defined by the emotions of shock, incapacity, and, notably, fear. In a telling passage, he stresses the emotional resistance he felt toward the notion of visiting Warsaw and Lodz— prewar Polish Jewry's two largest centers:

[412] Tsanin 1952: 60

413

וועו איך בין געקומען איצט קיין פוילן האָב איך מורא געהאַט אַרייַנצוקומען אין צוויי שטעט: וואַרשע און לאָדזש. עס איז גאָר נישטאָ אַזאַ שרעקלעכער חלום, ווי שרעקלעך עס קאָן זיין די וויַרקלעכקייט. און פאַר די וויַרקלעכקייט פון וואַרשע און לאָדזש האָב איך מורא געהאַט. אין דעם מאָמענט, וועו איך האָב זיך געדאַרפט שטעלן פּנים־אל־פּנים מיט וואַרשע און לאָדזש האָב איך געהאַט דאָס געפיל, ווי איך וואָלט אייַנגעשטעלט דאָס לעבן און נאָך עפּעס מער ווי דאָס לעבן...

איך האָב באַגעגנט צענדליקער יידן אין וואַרשע, וואָס זענען נאָך נישט געווען אויף די חורבות פון געטאָ. זיי האָבן מורא זיך צו טרעפן מיט דעם בילד. זיי ציטערן אימת מות, אַז נאָך דעם ווי זיי ווועלן זעען דעם חורבן ווועלן זיי נישט קענען צוריקקערן אַהיים, זיי ווועלן מוזן אַנטלויפן פון פוילן.

When I now came to Poland, I was afraid of entering two cities: Warsaw and Lodz. No nightmare can be as horrible as can sometimes be the reality. And of the reality of Warsaw and Lodz I was afraid. At the moment when I have to face Warsaw and Lodz I had a feeling as if I was endangering my life and even something greater than my life… I encountered tens of Jews in Warsaw who had not yet visited the ruins of the ghetto. They feared what they might see. They are more generally frightened that after seeing the destruction, they will not be able to go back home, but will have to flee from Poland.

Tsanin's mention of other Jews who shared his feelings is characteristic of the strong emphasis on communal Jewish life evident in this period's Yiddish travelogues. Its personal aspects notwithstanding, Tsanin's journey was above all a fact-finding mission undertaken for the sake of satisfying a communal need. Accordingly, his book includes a number of photographs—mostly ones he took himself—which reveal the extent of the destruction. Some of his decisions about what to photograph reflect his specific personal and professional affiliations. Thus, the snapshot of the heap of dust that used to be "Tłomackie 13"—the home of the Yiddish Writers' Union and the focal point of Yiddish literary activity at 13 Tłomackie Street in Warsaw—had special poignancy to Tsanin's professional and intellectual community, symbolizing the end of the once vigorous world of Yiddish literature and journalism in Poland.[414]

[413] Tsanin 1952: 73.

[414] Tsanin 2.

In Tsanin's text, the personal and the communal, individual grief and collective duty become intertwined—in a manner at times reminiscent of the Jewish tradition of saying kaddish, the prayer for the dead that requires a quorum of ten Jews. Trips to Eastern Europe acquire the status of pilgrimages, while the tasks of documenting and remembering become part of the sanctification of Jewish Europe and the six million *kedoyshim* (holy martyrs).

The focus of the travelogues is therefore more on the past than on the present. Samuel Wohl's description of his flight in a Polish military airplane on his way to Warsaw reads like a kaddish for his murdered family:

> מיר דערנענטערן זיך צו וואַרשע . . . ביי מיר נעמט די האַרץ קלאַפֿען שטאַרקער . . . איך ווייס אַז קיינער פון מיין משפּחה וועט דאָרט ניט וואַרטן פֿאַר מיר . . . ניט מיין עלטסטער ברודער אברהם, דער גוטער מענטש, דער רייכער וואָס האָט אויסגעהאַלטן אַ האַלבע משפּחה, ניט זיין גאָר קלוגע פרוי עלקעלע . . . איך ווייס אַז זיי זיינען מער ניטאָ.[...][415]
>
> We are nearing Warsaw… My heart begins to beat more strongly… I am aware that nobody from my family will be waiting for me there… Not my older brother Avrom, the good man, the wealthy one who supported half the family, not his very smart wife Elkele… I know that they are gone.

Wohl does not stop there, but continues to enumerate his dead relatives, supplying each name with a short, invariably positive, characteristic. This moving passage reveals elements of the tendency to focus on good memories and to idealize the past. This tendency only grows stronger in the 1950s, as writers and readers recover from the initial shock. Idealization and selective remembering go hand in hand with sentimentalization and distortion, and these tendencies are apparent both in actual travelogues and in autobiographies and memoirs.

The transformation of Eastern Europe into a sacred space is explicit in many Yiddish texts of that period. The status which it acquires has much in common with what the land of

[415] Samuel Vohl. *Mayn rayze keyn Varshe*. New York: Samuel Wohl, 1947: 14

Israel had been to many generations of Jews before the rise of modern Zionism: an eternal, remote, and inalienable semi-mythical space linked to visions of both great calamities and past glory. True appreciation is only possible once its object is forever gone, and so Poland has been transformed into a mythical space that now warrants a Hebrew designation to underscore its holy status: *"medines-Poyln."* As a sacred space, it is now subject to certain taboos, and any critical or negative portrayal of it therefore becomes problematic. No wonder Isaac Bashevis Singer would later be chastised for supposedly offending the memory of the six million by portraying unsympathetic Jewish characters in his works.

The memorialization project at the heart of memoirs, autobiographies and *yizker-bikher*, has much in common with travelogues: it, too, involves describing—sometimes in a neutral impersonal tone and sometimes with strong emotions—Jewish communities in particular cities and towns, with their streets, buildings, accents, customs, cuisine, and so on. In the wake of the physical obliteration of much of Eastern Europe, the act of writing and remembering becomes a substitute for travel.

The role of memory in literature in general and in Yiddish travel literature in particular is key for understanding the texts' narrative structure as well as their social and literary function. The theme of memorial preservation and a referential framework based on a common past are apparent in most modern travelogues. This theme may be expressed indirectly through verbal and stylistic choices or directly, as, for example, in passages such as Mishkovski's description of the Muslim school in Eritrea in terms of a Jewish heder, which contrasts the author's past experiences with his current "adventures," or in discussions of the limitations and deceptions of human memory.[416] A characteristic example of a reference to a shared past appears in Yankev

[416] Mishkovski, Noyekh. *Etyopye: yidn in Afrike un Azye*. Chicago: M. Ceshinsky, 1936: 10.

Beler's postwar travelogue, in a passage describing the author's flight over the Andes on his way from Argentina to Chile:

> דער אַעראָפּלאַן פאָרט איצט אַזוי נאָענט צווישן צוויי מיט שניי באַדעקטע בערג, אַז אייך דאַכט זיך, אַט־אַט שטרעקט איר אַרויס די האַנט דורכן פענצטער און כאַפּט אַ הויפן שניי און טוט אַ וואַרף אויף דעד וועלט...
> איר דערמאָנט זיך אין אייערע חדר־יאָרן אין היימישן שטעטל צווישן מנחה און מעריב, וועו דער רבי איז אַוועק אין בית־המדרש און די תלמידים האָבן צווישן זיך געפירט אַ מלחמה מיט קוילן שניי. מיר געפינען זיך, ווי דער אַמעריקאַנער פּילאָט מעלדעט, אַריבער פינף און צוואַנציק טויזנט פוס אין דער הויך. [417]
>
> The airplane is now flying so closely among snow-covered mountains that it seems as if you could stretch your hand through the window and grab lump of snow and throw it far far away… The heder years come back to memory in the native shtetl between the afternoon and evening prayers, when the teacher would leave for the bet-midrash and the students would wage war among themselves with snowballs. We are now, as the American pilot announces, over 25,000 feet in the air.

The sight of the white snow in the exotic landscape of Latin America triggers memories of a different universe—in a manner reminiscent of Marcel Proust's famous *"petites madeleines"*—and all of a sudden the text's alleged main subject is deposed by images that are simultaneously more remote and more precious.

What distinguishes the use of memory in the descriptions of immediate postwar travel to Eastern Europe is somewhat of a reversal: instead of referencing the past in order to strengthen the portrayal of the present, with the latter remaining the main objective, the past takes precedence and overshadows, dismisses, and, in a certain sense, erases the present. The irretrievability of the past renders it concrete and complete, while the present is not so much a new reality, as a *non-reality*, a gap, an absence, whose only meaning is as the symbol of loss and invitation to remember, sanctify, and seal the world that is no more.

[417] Beler, Yankev. *Iber 20 Latayn-Amerikaner lender*. Buenos Aires: Yidish, 1953. 233

Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, most other travel destinations become marginal, as the Yiddish world's attention is fixed on Eastern Europe. Due to political, economic and emotional reasons, the immediate post-Holocaust years are not conducive to other kinds of travel. Even such a momentous event as the establishment of the state of Israel does not produce much Yiddish travel writing. The prewar competition between the Zionist project and other political and geographic options is rendered largely irrelevant, while the new hope brought by the Jewish state is more conducive to poetry and to journalistic writing with a focus on politics than to the travelogue genre. Yiddish descriptions of travel to western Europe in the late 1940s are essentially an extension of the East European travelogues, as they, too, are primarily concerned with the current devastation and the contrast between the past and the present. Eliyahu Trotski's first impressions of Germany contains the same theme of nightmarish reality of ruin: *"A koshmar, a beyzer kholem, epes azoyns, vos men fantazirt in a krankhaftn tsushtand fun hoykhn fiber – dos iz mayn ershter ayndruk baym oyfvakhn fun shlof afn daytshn bodn"* (A nightmare, a bad dream, something that can only be imagined in a sick state of high fever—this is my first impression after waking up on the German soil).[418]

France, and especially its glamorous capital, had been a favorite prewar destination for East European Jewish intellectuals. Dozens of Yiddish writers and journalists, including such well-known figures as Asch and Nakhmen Mayzil, descended on Paris during the Colonial Exposition in 1931 and the World Exposition of 1937, and wrote rapturous accounts of it for the Yiddish press. The tone of Mayzil's portrayal of Paris in 1947 is drastically different and opens with a quotation from the biblical book of Ruth:

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[418] Trotski, Elyohu. *Goles Daytshland: ayndrukn fun a rayze*. Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in Argentine, 1950. 49-50.

„הזאת נעמי ?" — איז דאָס נעמי, — איז דאָס דער אַמאָליקער פּרעכ־
טיקער, לוקסוסאַרטיקער און עלעגאַנטער פּאַריז ? — דאָס איז די ערשטע
פּראַגע, ווּאָס מען פרעגט זיך אַליין און אַנדערע, ווען מען קומט אין פּאַריז,
ווען מען גייט איבער די גאַסן, ווען מען באַגעגנט זיך מיט פּלעצער, מיט
מענטשן, ווען מען קוקט אַריין אין די שוי־פענצטער, ווען מען באַאָבאַכטעט
פּרויען און מענער אין די קאַפייען, אין טעאַטער[...] 419

> "Is this Naomi?" Is this the former splendid, luxurious and elegant Paris? — This is the first question that one asks oneself and others after arriving in Paris, when one walks on the streets, when one faces places, people, when one looks at the shop windows, when one observes women and men at cafes, in the theater….

Both Mayzil and his readers would have been aware of Naomi's forlorn reply "

"אל־תקראנה לי נעמי; קראן לי מרא, כי־המר שדי לי מאד

(Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me) and its fitting connotations for Mayzil's Parisian chapter. Yet however shocking Paris, Berlin, or Munich may have looked to Yiddish writers, the present state of those cities was perceived as part of the general European disaster, rather than a specifically Jewish topic. The travelogues by Mayzil and Trotski convey an awareness that while countries such as France and Germany, which however deep in ruins would sooner or later undoubtedly see their broken roads, palaces, and private homes rebuilt by their recovering populations, the same would not be true of East European "Yiddishland."

Even destinations that had not been part of the war often provoke war-related reactions from Jewish travelers, as if the very absence of visible signs of destruction were suspect. Dora Teytlboym, describing her visit to Switzerland soon after the war, constructs her depiction around her prewar memories of a shopkeeper from her native shtetl. Unlike the shtetl memories, common in Yiddish literature of that period, that conveyed a sense of holiness and tender affection for the past, Teytlboym's shtetl shadow possesses decidedly dark connotations:

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[419] Mayzil, Nakhmen. *Tsvishn khurbn un oyfboy: bagegenishn, ayndrukn, un batrakhtungen fun a rayze iber Eyrope un Erets-Yisroel*. New York: Ikuf, 1947: 22.

אַ סך פון די שווייצאַרישע קרעמער האָבן מיר דערמאָנט אין חיים־בער דעם שניט־קרעמער פון מיין שטעטל, ביי וועלכן מען פלעגט קויפן תכריכים פאַר אַלע געשטאָרבענע. מיט דער זעלבער רואיקייט פלעגט ער האַלטן דעם אַרשין אין האַנט, פאַמעלעך אָפּגעמאָסטן, און מיטן שערעלע אַ פּיק געמאַן אין ביידע זייטן, געבעטן דעם קונה צו האַלטן איין זייט אין דורכגעלאָפּן מיטן שערל די ברייט פון לייוונט. חיים בער האָט קיינמאָל ניט פאַרקויפט אויף באָרג. זיין פּנים האָט קיינמאָל ניט געביטן דעם אויס־דרוק.[420]

> Many Swiss shopkeepers reminded me of Khaim-Ber the draper from my shtetl, from whom one used to buy burial shrouds for all the dead. With the same calm he used to hold the ruler in his hand, measure slowly, give it a flick with scissors on both sides, asked the customer to hold on to one side, and would run through with the scissors across the breadth of the linen. Khaim-Ber never sold on credit. His face never changed its expression.

The deathly figure of Khaim-Ber is associated with death not only professionally, but even in his physical appearance and movements and facial expression. It is thus the deep strong emotional response which expresses the author's perception of the peaceful country not as an outsider that had nothing to do with what was happening, but rather one whose sheer neutrality and passivity would be tantamount to condoning or passive assistance.

Postwar accounts of Jewish travel to Eastern Europe have many parallels to Jewish immigrants' prewar descriptions of visiting their native shtetlekh and cities back in Poland and elsewhere. In both cases, the journey back to Europe means returning to one's own past and involves themes of nostalgia and loss—if only the irrevocable loss of one's previous self. In both cases, the travel and the act of writing about it can lead to emotional crisis or to self-affirmation. And yet there is a critical difference: unlike the later accounts, the prewar writing often exhibits fear of being pulled back into one's former environment, now viewed through the prism of one's new experiences. Such resistance to the potential reidentification with the Old Country is much less perceptible in the postwar works—the ambiguity and conditionality are largely gone. The

[420] Teytlboym 26.

Holocaust creates a chasm between *before* and *after*; *then* and *now*; *the physical reality* and *memory* with its inherent elusiveness and potential for distortion.

The Holocaust changed the direction of Yiddish travel literature—or, depending on one's approach, suppressed it, at least temporarily. The enormous changes caused by World War II shifted the genre's focus inward, while at the same time prompting the beginning of the redefinition of the Jewish geography. While the interwar texts reflect worldwide exploration, creative search for identity, and competition among different ideologies, the postwar decade brings a reevaluation of the personal and communal past and the tension between inalienable identification on the one hand and eternal severance on the other. This period also introduces the theme of the celebration and appreciation of the new Jewish homes outside of Eastern Europe, along with the challenges of having to redefine one's alliances and acquire a new sense of belonging in Israel, the Americas, and elsewhere. Starting in the later 1950s and beyond, these themes will dominate the postwar Yiddish travelogue.

2. In Search of Kinfolk: Solidarity and Nationhood

Between the mid 1950s and the early 1970s, the idea of Jewish travel as an act of communal solidarity and national affirmation becomes Yiddish travel literature's most distinct feature. Due to the Jewish people's worldwide dispersal and the consequent possibility of encountering one's fellow Jews nearly anywhere on the globe, communal themes have been present in Jewish travel writing for centuries. Yiddish travel writers tended to be highly aware of their readers' curiosity about foreign Jewish communities, and to some it also came naturally to position themselves as their communities' "representatives."

The intensification of these themes in the postwar era may be attributed to the Jewish response to the national calamity of the Holocaust, during which Jews were treated *collectively* by their enemies—not as individuals but merely as *Jews*. Jewish refugees' resettlement in new geographic locations (most commonly in Israel, the United States, and Argentina) allowed Yiddish travel writing to overcome its preoccupation with Eastern Europe and the past it represented. Yet the growing range of destinations only serves to accentuate these texts' striking thematic and emotional uniformity caused by their common urge to affirm the Jewish people's survival and potential for renewal, reconstruction, and unity. Even travel writers who had previously devoted little attention to specifically Jewish topics often could not, or else did not want to, resist the power of the postwar period's general trend.

In the context of the dwindling numbers of Yiddish writers and readers and the growing linguistic and cultural gap between prewar and postwar generations, the Yiddish travelogue's geographic diversification of the 1950s coincided with the beginning of the genre's quantitative and qualitative demise. Some of the same reasons that had led to the diminishing of the postwar Yiddish travelogue's scope and literary ambitions were also behind its renewed emphasis on the value of travel as a method of exploring such themes as communal intimacy and cultural regeneration.

The search for one's fellow Jews has always been one of the most prominent and characteristic themes of Jewish travel writing. In a prewar travel account of Malta, journalist Y. M. Nayman, describes the activity of looking for Jews as a national pastime of sorts—comparable to quite mundane and simple pleasures popular in other cultures: "*Es zenen do farshidene hanoes af der velt: an amerikaner hot lib tsu kayen gumi, a polak tsu esn rakes, a frantsoyz – aroystsugeyn mit a vendke tsu taykh un khapn fish, mayn hanoe iz zikh tsu lozn in*

merkhokim un zukhn yidn." (There are different pleasures in the world: an American likes to chew gum, a Pole to eat crayfish, a Frenchman to go to a river with a fishing rod to catch fish; my pleasure is to travel far away and to look for Jews.)[421] Nayman's lighthearted description of this peculiar Jewish "pursuit" sheds light on a phenomenon with complex—and often anything but humorous—connotations. Whether things are good or bad, looking for Jews is the (Jewish traveler's) natural instinct. "*Vi nor ikh hob mikh oysgeheylt fun di ongethepete pokn*" (When I recovered from the smallpox I had contracted), writes Parishevski about his trip to Bolivia in the early 1920s without any explanations, "*bin ikh aroys af La-Pazer gasn zukhn yidn*" (I went to the streets of La Pas to look for Jews), as if this were the most natural thing for a traveler to do in a new place.[422] Yet despite the humorous comparison, the meaning and connotations search for Jews was much more complex and significant than the American love affair with chewing gum. And this is especially true of the postwar version of this theme, when more Yiddish travelogues appear whose authors are specifically concerned with travel explicitly or in effect for the sake of looking of Jews—and in light of the post-war post tragedy connotations of this act, in the context of sudden great loss and the striving for rebuilding and renewal.

While postwar travelogues about Europe convey a sense of lamenting and mourning, then this one introduces a sense of renewal and unity. From focusing on the past in the urge to memorialize the world of Jewish East Europe in the wake of the colossal destruction of World War II, shifts to the present—the appreciation of the present moment, of the survival, of the reclaimed dignity and new places of settlement. Although a return to the prewar curiosity about the rest of the world is there, as the culture can now afford it, the new overwhelming focus

[421] Yidn af Malta, H 1926

[422] Parishevski 1944: 12.

becomes on the presence of Jews and their renewed sense of unity, solidarity, and symbolism of their life in different parts of the world. A return to the present is happening, but it is already beginning to look into the future – to continue the cyclical structure, as in Guberek writing about his experiences among Jewish immigrants in Colombia, focuses on what he considers the unnecessary and avoidable problem of the Sephardi-Ashkenazi divide:

דאָס אומנאַטירלעכע פּראָבלעם פון דער צעטיילונג צווישן צענטראַל־אייראָ־
פּעישע יידן און די ספּרדים פון די מזרח־לענדער. די לעצטע, זיבנען אין
זייער נע־ונד באַאיינפלוסט געוואָרן דורך אַנדערע קולטורן און מנהגים
ווי מיר.

עס באַקומט זיך דער אויבנאויפיקער אײַנדרוק ווי מיר וואָלטן געווען
צוויי קעגנזעצלעכע פּאָלוסן, וואָס זיבנען קוים פאַרבונדן דורך רעליגיעזע
פּעדעם. אָבער אײַס איז גענוג געווען אַז מיר זאָלן זיך באַגעגענען, אַז מיר
זאָל זיך טרעפן אין דער גרויסער וועלט, אַז דער טיפּער אָפּהילך פון יאָר־
הונדערטער אין אונדז, זאָל צו אונדז אַ רעד טאָן וועגן אַ קרובהשאַפט וואָס
וואָרצלט אין דער ביבל.[423]

> The unnatural problem of the separation between central European Jews and the Sephardim of the Eastern countries. The latter were in their wanderings influenced by other cultures and customs than we were.
> The superficial impression is created as if we were on two opposite poles, which are barely connected by religious threads. Yet it was enough for us to meet, for us to meet in the wide world, for the deep echo of the centuries in us to speak to us all of the closeness rooted in the Bible.

Jewish writers developed a tendency during this period to engage in ponderings of Jewish history on a big scale – given the momentous events and changes the urge was natural—and Guberek's call for and affirmation of unity is highly typical.

Starting especially in the 1950s, the focus is on celebrating the Jewish presence. Even travelers who paid more attention to themselves and to otherness, now feel the urge, need, or sometime obligation and pressure to seek out local Jews when they arrive in a new place, or else to undertake the trip specifically for that purpose. For there is a heightened appreciation on the part of readers and the Yiddish intellectual circles. It is enlightening to compare two opinions of what the desired emphasis in the Yiddish travelogue should be—one from before the war and the

[423] Guberek 1977: 284.

other one from after. In the postwar era, the trauma of the Holocaust and the ever-increasing dwindling of the world of Yiddish culture contributed to growing appreciation of precisely such focus on Jewish matters and of Yiddish literary creativity in general regardless of the subject. The first inklings of this tendency in this attitude became apparent already in the late 1930s when the rise of Nazism and antisemitism is throughout Europe revived many Jews' national feelings. The *folksmentsh* representing the Jewish masses is now worth more than the "burning horizons of a wonderland," to use Molodowski's expression from her article about Hirschbein, now that the world horizons were becoming increasingly inhospitable and unconducive to admiring foreign wonders.[424] To see what exactly Molodowsky has in mind in her praise of Hirschbein, it is enough to look at the following excerpt from Hirschbein's prefacing the description of meeting the only Jew on the the isle of Rarotonga in the Cook Islands in Polynesia:

נאָך אמאָל פֿאַרשן די בליקן די טריט פון אונזערע אייגענע וואַנדערער, איינגעקריצטע איבער גאַר דער וועלט, אויף אלע ברייטע וועגן און אויך אויף די שמאָלע, זייטיקע שטעגן. און עס ווילט זיך נאָך אמאָל דערשפירן די שאַרפע אויפרעגונגען וואָס עס דער־וועקט אין דיין מהות דער פֿלוצלינגער אידישער בליק פון די ערשטע פּאָר אידישע אויגן וואָס קומען דיר אנטקעגן נאָך א לאַנגער, ווייטער רייזע איבער ימען.

ווי גרויס איז דער חלוק צווישן דעם אידן און נישט־אידן, אין ווייטן וועג און ווייטן לאַנד!

עם טראָגט דער נישט־איד די רו מיט זיך און פֿאַרפלאַנצט זי אהינטער זיין נייַ הויז. און דער איד נעמט מיט זיך מיט די אומרו און טראָגט זי כסדר אין האַרצן.[425]

> Once again the glances study the steps of our own wanderers, carved all over the world, on all wide roads as well as on the narrow side paths. And one wants to once again feel the sharp excitement provoked in your being by the sudden Jewish glance of the first here of Jewish eyes the great you after a long distant journey on the seas. How great the difference between the Jew and the non-Jew in the distant journey and distant country! The non-Jew carries peace and plants it behind his new home. And the Jew take restlessness and carries it constantly in his heart.

[424] Niger and Elkin, *Perets Hirshbeyn: tsu zayn zekhtsikstn geboyrn-tog*, 152.

[425] Hirschbein 1927:23.

The binary opposition between Jew and non-Jew—despite all of his desire to embrace humanity in all of its diversity—is unshakable for Hirschbein. And it is notable that he stresses that it is all the more so when on a journey. To readers like Molodowsky, Hirschbein's reference to his joy of seeing his fellow Jews on an island in the middle of the Pacific would take precedence over a neutral description of that region's exotic landscape.

Yet as with other texts in Chapter 1, in which several examples of Jewish travelers' encountering Jews in different part of the world were analyzed, the emphasis is somewhat different from the new one: it is on homelessness as a poignant and romantic quality of restlessness in Hirschbein's text. Other texts took it as a matter of fact, a convenience for the Jewish traveler, an ethnographic curiosity, and in the context of tragic dispersal and political weakness and even punishment with religious, romantic, or political connotations.

In the postwar period, not only the joy of discovering Jews, the joy of experiencing "*a yidish vort*" became central. When it comes to the subjects of loss and its treatment and relationship with language and literary creativity in Yiddish, treated so compellingly by Roskies in his *Against the Apocalypse* with respect to World War II and other tragic and *apocalyptic* events of Jewish history, the Jew's clinging to the written word in the absence of other sources of stability, comfort, and continuity is a major theme. Avrom Sutzkever described his experience of writing poetry while in the Vilna ghetto as having been one of the reasons he stayed alive and sane: his life depended on his ability to discern and embrace the *Yiddish word* resounding in his mind. Before the war, proving one's ability to overcome Yiddish—even among one's own—was appreciated, as in the stories of Peretz's opening meetings with aspiring Yiddish writers conducted in Polish, rather than Yiddish—which was after all the main subject of the conversation. In his account of trip to South Africa, taken in the mid 1920s, Hirschbein mentions

the following episode: *"Vi der shteyger, hot zikh der shmues ongehoybn af a tsebrokhneme english mit a burishn aktsent. Azoy heybt zikh do on tsu farbindn a shmues, ven yidn bagegenen zikh. Past nisht glaykh ontsuheybn redn yidish."* (As usual, the conversation began in a broken English with a Boer accent. This is how the conversation starts here when Jews meet. Speaking Yiddish right away is not considered proper.)[426] It is hard to believe that two compatriots running into each other in a faraway exotic place who posses a common native language would not immediately jump at the opportunity to use it. – Yet such was the case with Yiddish and the complexity of its speakers' perception of their own culture.

And when it came to finding Jews, the traveler was in a great position—especially after the war—with the spread of Jewish refugee communities worldwide, including remote and previously unknown locations as Jewish immigrants starting in the 1930s could not afford being picky and would move to the most original places. As the famous Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer remarks in a review of a work by Shoshkes:

[427]

> […] the Jewish traveler has […] the possibility everywhere, in every remote settlement, to seek out Jew, and he is never disappointed. Wherever he comes, he finds Jews. Especially in the present time. Dr. Shoshkes found Jews nor only in Siam and Afghanistan, but also in Swaziland, somewhere in the African jungle.

[426] Hirschbein 1927: 202.

[427] Singer's Review of Shoshkes, 1952.

Singer's mostly positive review of Shoshkes is a sign of the times. It is hard to know what—if anything—Singer thought of Shoshkes's work before the war, but the perceptible warmth toward the idea of this specifically Jewish pursuit is in agreement with the general zeitgeist within postwar Yiddish culture.

What is even more telling is Shoshkes' own evolution. Most of his books are now dominated by specifically Jewish subjects—even if his geographic scope has not lessened. He still talks of places like Nairobi, Calcutta, and Kabul, as if he had spent half his life, comparing impressions from his previous visits to the current one. But the mere titles of his postwar works are telling: *Masoes reb Khaim* (1957), *Mit yidn tsvishn indiyaner, neger un araber: a nesie iber dray kontinentn* (1960), and *Yidn in vayte lender* (1964). While the Jewish implications of the latter two titles are self-explanatory, the first one is somewhat suppler in its adaptation of the Hebrew formula, which to the unit reader would constitute an immediate illusion to the famous novel about the travels of Benjamin the Third. None of Shoshkes's prewar works have any Hebrew where traditionalist elements in their titles. But the war changed everything. As if in response to the 1930s review quoted at the beginning of this chapter, his postwar books are as if a conscious attempt to prove his credentials as a faithful Jew, a folksmentsh—who never abandoned the traditional devotion to the prayer shawl of his grandfather. In the following moving passage, he describes an episode that contains the quintessence of his renewed sense of Jewishness and his urge to make it feature so much more prominently in his writing:

בין איך דאָך מיט דרײַ יאָר צוריק אַרויסגעפאָרן פון אַן אינדישן דערפל אין די טיפענישן פון עקוואַדאָר, כדי צו ווערן א צענטער צום מנין אין שטעטל אַמבאַטאָ, ווו אַביסל פאַרוואָגלטע יידן האָבן ראש־השנה געדאַווענט אויפן ראַנד פון אַן אָפּגרונט (בוכשטעבלעך), ווואָס האָט זיך געעפנט נאָך אַן ערדציטערניש, וואָס האָט באַגראָבן דערפער און הונדערטער מענטשן. דער וועג צו אַמבאַטאָ איז געלעגן דורך צעטרייסלטע בערג, וואָס האָבן שטיינער געוואָרפן, און דאָס האָט נאָך מער פאַרשטאַרקט מיין לוסט צו זיין מיט זיי, מיט די יידן, מיט זייערע תפילות אין זייער אייגנזאַמקייט. ס׳איז גאָרנישט געווען אין דעם פון „תשובה־דראַנג", ווי אַנדערע וואָלטן געמיינט. כ׳האָב דאָך קיינמאָל נישט אויפגעהערט צו זיין צוגעדריקט צום טאָטנס טלית אין די אַלע אויסטערלישע פאָרמען, וואָס ער האָט אָנגענומען, — קיינמאָל נישט, קיין איין מאָל נישט, — בין איך באַפרייט דעריבער פון ווערן א „בעל־תשובה"...[428]

> Three years ago I left an Indian village in the depths of Ecuador in order to be a tenth one in the minyan in the town of Ambata, where a few isolated Jews said prayers at the edge of a precipice--a literal one--which had opened after an earthquake, which had buried villages and hundreds of people. The road to Ambata lay through shattered mountains, which were throwing rocks, and this only strengthened my desire to be with them, with the Jews, with their prayers in their loneliness. There was nothing in it of the "tshuve drive" [repentance drive], as others would've thought. For I had never stopped clinging to my father's tallis in all the strange forms that it would assume, – never, not for a single day – I am therefore free from the notion of becoming a "*bal-tshuve*" [penitent].

His insistence that the fact of his risking his life for the sake of fulfilling the traditional ritual Jewish duty not be taken as a sign of religious repentance or new affiliation is there any characteristic an important for understanding the role the Jewishness played in his identity and the identities of other Jewish travelers after the war, as the earlier project of learning about the world for its own sake was rendered suspect by the disastrous failure to prevent the tragedy of the Holocaust.

For Shoshkes, admitting there was the war that turned him back to tradition would have been tantamount to recognizing that is prewar work have been severely lacking in Jewish authenticity and that it was at the costs of the great suffering that he learned the lesson of what his true values were and his true allegiances should remain. The theme of Manger's refusing to kiss the ground in the land of Israel once again sounds loud and clear – there is no need to return

[428] Shoshkes 1957: 310.

to something that one has never abandoned, never left. As the Yiddish proverb goes, *"Men ken umetum bagrobn vern"* ("One can get buried anywhere," suggesting that it makes little difference one's precise location in the world, fundamentally the laws of life remain the same). By the same logic, one can be buried (and live) as a Jew anywhere. Thus, failing to join the prayer quorum in the mountainous region of Ecuador would've carried connotations a kind of betrayal of the memories of his family, of the world from which he originated in which have been murdered period affirming his intimacy an naturalness with Jewish tradition might be the only way he sees to preserve connection and to honor the memory of the world he lost, of the world that he perhaps felt he had not appreciated enough in his constant urges to travel two faraway regions, to experience everything that would be as different as possible from the Sabbaths and prayer houses of his native Bialystok. And so in the middle of his travelogue, he suddenly declares the foundations of his identity:

> ווען איך בליק צוריק אויף די כמעט זעכציק יאר, וואָס איך געדענק, לויכט אויף, פריער פֿאַר אַלץ, מיין טאַטנס־זיידנס שטוב מיט דער איינגעוואָר־צלטער יידישער טראַדיציע און רעגלאַמענטירטע וואָכנטעג, שבתים, ימים־טובים, וועלכע האָבן זיך געביטן ווי דורך א פֿערפעקטען מעכאַניזם מיט שכינה־שטראָלן באַהויכט.
>
> אהבת ישראל און אהבת הבורא (ליבשאפט צום באַשעפער) זענען געווען די זיילן אויף וועלכע די געביידע פון מיין פריסטער דערציאונג האָט זיך אָנגעשפּאַרט.
>
> און דער אַלטער פֿאַמיליען־בית־מדרש אין ביאַליסטאָק איז געווען דער קאָנטאַקט־פּלאַץ סיי מיט יידן און סיי מיטן בורא.[429]

When I look back on the nearly sixty years that I remember, before everything else, lights up my father's and grandfather's with the deeply rooted Jewish tradition and regular weekdays, Sabbaths, holidays, which changed as if through a perfect mechanism elevated with the rays of the Shechina [divine presence]. *Aaves-Yisroel* [the love for one's fellow Jews] and *aaves-haboyre* [the love for the Creator] were the pillars on which the building of my earliest education was leaning. And the old family *beys-medresh* [prayer house] in Bialystok was the contact center both with Jews and with the Creator.

[429] Shoshkes 1957: 309.

While Shoshkes's point of departure is now his memory shtetl, for many there was a specific address in the present: it was not only the tragedy of the Holocaust, but also the positive incredible success of 1948 lead to a drastic increase in Jewish solidarity, togetherness, and national feelings. For some Jews, it was the final end of their search for home—their previous wanderings being views as part of that endless search. Tsanin's book about his various wanderings ends in a note that is not really about the future promise—as some of the earlier travelogues about the Land of Israel would convey, but about the peace of having found home: "*Ikh hob shoyn ale grenetsn hinter zikh un bin endlekh in der heym unter di bloye erets-yisroeldike himlen*."[430] Statements like this, expressive of celebration and gratitude, which are so common for that period, and only be fully appreciated in the context of the post-Holocaust Jewish consciousness. The shadow of the "third destruction" is made explicit in Levenson's 1961 travelogue, in which the rage at the "Nazi beasts" is still very fresh:

> איר שטייט אויף פּלעצער, וואָס זיינען יאָרטויזנטער אַלט, און זיינען פֿאַרהייליקט געוואָרן אין פּאָלק, דורך תּפילות, אין וועלכע ס'איז אויס־געדרוקט געוואָרן די בענקשאַפֿט, אַז זיי זאָלן זיך ווידער אומקערן אין יידישע הענט . . . און איר, פֿונעם טראַגישן דור, וואָס האָט דורכגע־מאכט אַזוי פיל מלחמות, רעוואָלוציעס און דעם „דריטן חורבן", פֿאַר־אורזאַכט פון די נאַצישע חיות, ימח־שמם,—איר געפינט זיך אויף די דאָזיקע פּלעצער, וועלכע זיינען צוריק אין יידישע הענט! איר באַטראַכט זיי מיט דרך־ארץ און מיט געמישטע געפֿילן פון ציטער, טרויער און פרייד![431]
>
> You're standing in places that are thousands of years old and have been made holy by the people, through prayers, expressing the longing that they should once again be in the Jewish hands… And all of you, of the tragic generation, which has gone through so many wars revolutions and the "third destruction" [i.e. the Holocaust], caused by the Nazi beasts, made their names be erased, – you you're standing in these places, which are back in Jewish hands! You look at them with respect and with mixed feelings of trembling, sadness and joy!

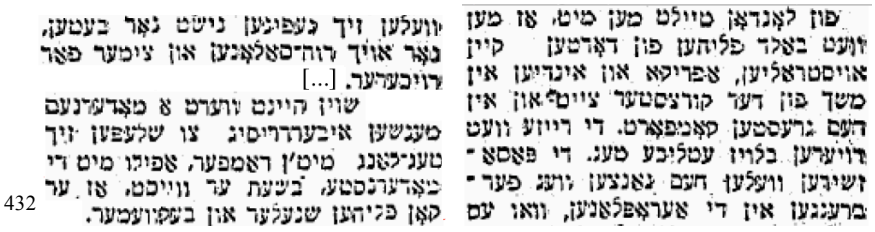
[430] Tsanin 1969: 243.

[431] Levenson 23.

Such statements are beautifully uncomplicated, but the effect of the founding of the State of Israel was more complex than simply that of uniting. Some of the deep changes it introduced into Yiddish travel literature it reintroduced certain prewar themes that had been rendered irrelevant during the war. Most notably, there was once again—as described in Chapter 2—a kind of renewed political competition with the Zionist idea and Israel's outreach of *Kibbutz Galuyot* ("the gathering of exiles") on the one hand, and occasional criticism, suspicion, or even a major rejection of Zionism coming from an anti-nationalist socialist position—critical of ideology—but most importantly for Yiddish culture – with some troubled by Israel's dismissal of Yiddish. The refusal to fully embrace Israel and Zionism on the part of some Yiddish writers and intellectuals was also an expression of an aesthetic and cultural position of commitment to a Jewish all-worldliness, to the concept of the idea of Jews as *veltfolk*—whether in its religious or romantic connotations. In other words, in the new situation of greater safety and reconstruction, the question of "Whither?"—geographically, politically, and culturally was partially revived, although with the utopian focus on the future, but rather a more positive and constructive attention and appreciation of the present.

The Jewish traveler's awareness of Jewry's worldwide dispersion and consequent possibility of encountering one's "coreligionists" almost anywhere in the world is one of the defining features of the Jewish journey starting from the middle ages, with travel as a means of maintaining contacts with other Jewish communities, discovering new communities, looking for the Ten Lost Tribes. It is not to be found in any other European culture to the same degree—and this aspect of the Jewish travelogue can easily be misunderstood when considered in the contexts of the Romantic notion of travel prevalent in European literature or the later phenomenon of mass tourism.

Unless one has in mind the activities of the mind, travel is inseparable from the issue of transportation. *"Beser shlehkt geforn eyder gut gegangen"* ("Better bad riding than good walking"), says the Yiddish folk wisdom as a testimony to its awareness of the challenges traveling on foot, which after all was a common phenomenon an earlier eras. Given the widespread poverty among them, East European Jews new this all too well, often living according to the principle expressed in another proverb: *"Az men hot nit keyn sus, muz men geyn tsu fus"* ("Without a horse, one has no choice but to walk"). The prewar Yiddish press fantasized about the future development of mass transportation, for a a major theme at the time and the reason why so many people could not possibly travel to faraway regions was the unaffordability, to say nothing of the time it took. As one article suggested based on reports from London:

 [432]

> From London is reported that it will soon be possible to fly from there to Australia, Africa and India within a very short time and in great comfort. The trip will only take a few days the passengers will spend the entire way inside the airplanes, in which there will be out only beds, but also salons for relaxation and rooms for smokers. […] Already today the modern man is getting tired of traveling for days by steamer, even on the most modern one, when he knows that he can fly faster and more comfortably.

While the 1950s did not quite match the expectations, the situation changed dramatically, contributing to the rise of mass tourism, which in turn contributed to the return to greater exploration and reach of Jewish travel and thus a relatively high number of Yiddish travel books—despite the stable of decline of Yiddish writing. The greater affordability of travel and

[432] Aeroplanen un kelers, H 1936

the greater financial stability in the new Jewish homes in places such as the United States were also important factors. Trips did not have to be undertaken for that specific purpose—but even tourist trips to exotic and standard destinations would partly be defined by the instinct to look for other Jews in the place that one visits or to leap at those opportunities that presented and to see those episodes as ultimately the most meaningful and rewarding parts of the journey. On Levenson's trip to Paris he visits the Holocaust monument[433], and in Rome, he admires *Moyshe* (i.e. Michelangelo's statue of Moses in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome),[434] and describes his Jewish satisfaction at seeing Hebrew graffiti at the Arc of Titus:

> איצט,
> אין יאָר 1960, מיט צוויי טויזנט יאָר שפּעטער, שטייט אַן אַמעריקאַנער
> ייד און לייענט אַראָפּ פון די וואַנט פון דעם האַלב־רואינירטן טריאומף
> טויער פון טיטוסן, די פאַרשידענע אויפשריפטן, פון טוריסטן אויף די
> וואַנט, אין עברית! ווי „טיטום הרשע", „צורר היהודים" און אַנדערע.
> איך קען נישט אַוועקגיין ביז דער חבר וואָלד פאָטאָגראַפירט מיך, ווי
> איך שטיי בײַם טויער פון טיטום הרשע . . . די באַפרידיקונג פון אַ
> יידן מיט צוויי טויזנט יאָר שפּעטער, נאָכן חורבן פון בית־המקדש![435]

> Now, in the year 1960, two thousand years later, an American Jew is standing in his reading on the walls of the half ruined Triumphal Arch of Titus the various inscriptions by tourists on the walls, in Hebrew! Like "*Titus ha-roshe*" [Titus the Wicked], "*tsoykorer ha-yehudim*" [enemy of the Jews] and others. I couldn't leave until my friend Vald took a photograph of me, standing at the origin of evil Titus… The satisfaction of a Jew two thousand years later after the destruction of the second Temple!

It is significant that he refers to himself as an "American." The rise of mass tourism went hand in hand with the growth of the new identity in the new places of residence: for instance, for those Jews now traveled as Americans—that association was a much more comfortable one than the prewar one with, say, Poland. And being an American tourist affected the perception and had its

[433] 12.

[434] 19.

[435] 17.

own connotations of wealth, capitalism, political and military power, and the association with English—the world's most widely understood international language. Even on his trip to Israel, he is an American, and the commercialization and standardization of mass tourism finds its full expression in this photo with the relaxed look and pipe, exuding calm confidence of a Western tourist and pleasures of tourist industry.[436]

But this rise was also the beginning of the deep crisis of the genre—which, however, Yiddish was not destined to face and test itself whether the unique nature of Jewish travel would've resulted in self recreation and the discovery of a new form of this genre that would revitalize it. Not that such tourist sites, as the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, or the Acropolis, left postwar Yiddish travel writers indifferent, yet the standard sightseeing was rarely the main goal. We'll never know what would have happened had the crisis of the genre not coincided with the crisis and drastic diminishing of Yiddish literary production. The decline of Yiddish and the increasing linguistically and culturally generation gap were akin in its scope, even if qualitatively entirely different, to the one at the beginning of the century in Chapter One. Yiddish writers were now addressing an increasingly smaller and aging readership, which found its reflection in a sense of greater intimacy, but also lesser literary ambition – in the absence of the prewar competition, experimentation, and literary boom.

While the previous chapters of this dissertation analyzed travel writers' positive and negative attitudes—expressed both directly and indirectly—to the notion of Jews as a *veltfolk* (a people of the world) and to the prospect of coming into contact with local Jewish communities in different places with the complex opposition between the communal urge and the desire to experience the Other, or, to put it differently, between "coming out of the ghetto" and embracing

[436] 45.

the worldwide Jewish community. The present chapter demonstrates that this theme's intensification during the postwar era stemmed from the Jewish response to a national calamity, in which Jews had been treated *collectively* by their enemies—not as individuals, each with his or her set of unique qualities and aspirations, but merely as *Jews*. In consequence, even those travel writers who, whether due to individualist aesthetics or universalist politics, had paid little attention to Jewish subjects in their prewar works, were not able to withstand the communal impulse pervading Yiddish culture after the Holocaust—and accordingly set out in search of fellow Jews. The gradual recovery from the shock of World War II and the resettlement in new places, especially Israel, America, and Argentina led to a return of travel literature of great diversity, whose central urge was to affirm renewal, reconstruction, and communal togetherness. Its lesser scope and literary experimentation on the one hand, were compensated by greater intimacy and warmth and appreciation on the other. Travel became for many a communal act, yet not of memorialization, but rather self-affirmation.

All of that period's Yiddish travel could be expressed in the following ship deck scene in Beler's postwar account, symbolic in its emphasis on unity and celebrating the diversity that can be untied in one passionate Jewish prayer:

> איצט שטייען דאָ אין שול אַלע
> יידן, נישטאָ קיין ערשטע אָדער דריטע קלאַס, וואָס זאָל זיי אָפּטיילן. אָט שטייט אַן אמעריקאַנער טוריסט, איינגעהילט אין א קליין זיידן אמעריקאַנער טלית. גלייך נעבן אים שטייט אַן אַלטער ייד פון פּויל, איינגעהילט אין אַלטן טערקישן טלית, פון וועלכן עס זעען זיך בלויז ערויס אָפּגעבליאקעוועטע פאַסן פון אַן אומבאשטימטן קאָליר. דעם טלית האָט ער אָפּגעראַטעוועט פון זיין פאַרמעגן און ווי אַן אויג אין קאָפּ אָפּגעהיט אין די קאַנצענטראַציע-לאַגערן... איצט פירט ער אים קיין ארץ ישראל. א בערלינער ייד, איינגעהילט אין אַנדערן סאָרט טלית, א ספרדי פון ארץ ישראל, א סירישער ייד, א פראַנצויזישער ייד, א מאַראָקאַנער יידישע פרוי, א יידישע פרוי מיט אירע צוויי יתומים פון אַמסטערדאַם, יידן פון אונגארן, משעכאָסלאָוואקיע, פּויל, יוגאָסלאַוויע, אַלע שטייען זיי איצט מיט פאַראייניקטע הערצער און זינגען אויס די מעלאָדיע, וואָס פאַראייניקט זיי אַלעמען דורך דורות און יאָרהונדערטער. איין פאָלק, איין טראַנעדיע, איין האָפנונג און איין לאַנד.[437]

[437] Beler, Yankev. *Erets-Yisroel*. Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun galitsyaner yidn in Argentine, 1948. 8-9.

> Now all the Jews are standing here in this synagogue, there is no first or third class, no separation. Here's an American tourist wrapped up in his grandfather's small prayer shawl. Right next to him is an old Jew from Poland, bound up in an old Turkish prayer shawl whose faded stripes of an indeterminate color. Out of all his possessions he saved this prayer shawl in the concentration camps, as if it was the apple of his eye... Now he is taking it to the Land of Israel. A Jew from Berlin, bound up in another kind of prayer shawl, a Sephardi from the Land of Israel, a Syrian Jew and a French Jew, a Moroccan Jewess, a Jewish woman from Amsterdam with her two orphans, Jews from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia – all of them are now standing with united hearts and are singing out a melody that unites them all across the generations and ages. One nation, one tragedy, one hope, and one country.

The Yom Kippur service Kol Nidre is a device used in many Yiddish works, including the 1938 Yiddish popular movie *A brivele der mamen*, but it has a special poignancy here, as the shadows of concentration camps on the one hand and the gathering of every sort of Jews in their ancient homeland. The point is that in this story, the American tourist and the Syrian Jew become one. Is this the end of diversity?

Conclusion

The Endless Itinerary: Findings and Critical Implications

The twentieth-century Yiddish travel literature reveals a shift from an identity based on exile and wandering toward one dominated by a sense of settling down. This evolution unfolded according to a cyclical structure with respect to both time and space. Early-twentieth-century travelogues exhibited a tendency to temporally prioritize the *present* moment by focusing on adventure, the acquisition of knowledge, and the establishment of connections with life outside the confines of *"yidishe gas"* (the Jewish street, i.e. Yiddish culture). Works of this period accordingly profiled a great variety of spatial destinations, including some that were seen as being distinctly exotic. The intensification of political struggle during the interwar period narrowed the focus of travel writers to a few specific destinations and reoriented them toward the *future*, whether expressed in the form of utopian ideas or in premonitions of disaster. In the immediate wake of the Holocaust, the preoccupation with the *past* tended to overshadow both the ruinous present and the uncertain future. But as the initial shock began to wear off toward the mid 1950s, many travelogues once again turned to the *present*. The emphasis now shifted to the celebration of survival and renewal by focusing on Jewish communities worldwide and on the empowering rise of the Jewish state. This cyclical progression from present to future to past and back to present displays a peculiar emotional and historical logic, with great hopes preceding disappointment and unease, and great destruction being followed by a renewal of hope and appreciation of the present. The development of both Yiddish travel and Yiddish travel literature are thus inseparable from their historical context.

The permeability of the genre's boundaries and the wide reach of its thematic concerns is what makes studying Yiddish travelogues so rewarding. The summary of the difference between a traveler and a tourist from Paul Bowles's novel *The Sheltering Sky* is pertinent here: "Whereas the tourist generally hurries back home at the end of a few weeks or months, the traveler, belonging no more to one place than to the next, moves slowly, over periods of years, from one part of the earth to another…"[438] Based on this definition, a great majority of Yiddish travelogues' authors were indeed travelers per excellence who lived according to the proverb: *"Ven men fort veyst men, ven men kumt tsurik veyst men nit"* (You know when you leave, you don't know when you'll come back).

[438] Bowles 1949: 6.

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